Dolley Short Guide

Dolley by Rita Mae Brown

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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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Contents

Characters

This is perhaps Brown's most challenging book of characters. The events described in the novel necessitate a large contingent of shopkeepers, servants, politicians, cabinet ministers and officers, both British and American, not to mention wives, family members and all of Washington's social butterflies, both male and female.

Although Brown does her best to sketch these characters with memorable traits, it is sometimes hard to remember who is who. To aid this effort, Brown has included both a breakdown of the members of Madison's cabinet in 1814, and a list of the characters, which, although rather daunting at first sight, it is nonetheless very useful as an aide-memoire to the reader.

Although in some ways a minor character in this book, as he is so eclipsed by the portrait of his wife, James Madison is presented sympathetically and with a remarkably human touch. When alone with Dolley, James relaxes his political guard and shows a gentle, honest and humorous nature. Brown seems to be indicating that there is a human being behind every public office, and that even the president of the United States cannot merely be a political machine. Ageing and tired but with an unremitting sense of duty, Madison often remarks on the voracious hunger for power and the presidency displayed by younger politicians, while admitting that his job is a difficult, sometimes distasteful one, and one in which he often experiences lack of support and feelings of futility.

Ultimately, it is Dolley Madison, the extraordinary woman who has the honor of being the only woman named in one of Brown's titles, who emerges as the most important and well-developed character and it is her story and her perception of the events taking place around her that are of para mount importance. Aged forty-five at the beginning of the narration, Dolley is still beautiful and stylish and wellknown for her reputation as an excellent hostess at the presidential dinners where it is she, rather than her husband, who talks with all the guests with polish and aplomb. When Dolley appears in this setting, there is a perceptible shift of focus from the outer to the inner woman who is, above all, a sought-after conversationalist with a warm but determined personality and a great wit. Obviously setting out to create a tribute to a woman she greatly admires, Brown nevertheless manages to temper the positive portrayal of Dolley with some very human traits which make her character more accessible and credible. As one critic has remarked, "(t)his is a careful, endearing depiction of an admirable woman."

Social Concerns

The historical novel Dolley is a portrait of an extraordinary first lady, Dolley Madison, placed against the backdrop of the war of 1812. In many ways the war serves to amplify many of the other social concerns dealt with in this novel. The fight for religious, political and national freedom that is a constant part of the human struggle is rendered more poignant and dramatic as loyalty and bravery are tested by the hardships imposed on a country that is at war. The role of women in society is also changed by the backdrop of violence and hardship. Brown continually points out that great acts of bravery and selfless devotion to the national cause were performed by "soldiers" that were not of the male gender.

A Quaker by birth, Dolley is cast out by the Society of Friends when she marries the much older future president, James Madison. However, she continues to embody the struggle between right and wrong exemplified in the act of war, which is completely at odds with her religious upbringing.

Her rebellious and beautiful black maid, Sukey, underlines the religious, political and moral problems associated with owning slaves. The political split between the New England States and the "southern" city of Washington delineates a north/south conflict that historically prefigures the American Civil War.

Techniques

The social and psychological portrait of Dolley Madison is effectively traced through a dual narrative. A large section of the narrative, and arguably the most compelling part, is given over to entries from Dolley's imagined personal journal, and is narrated in the first person. This technique has several uses, not the least of which is the placing of important historical events in the appropriate chronology, as Brown has her protagonist carefully date each entry. Additionally the reader is able to gauge Dolley's character and temper by the tone and length of her entries, and by the parts of her life that she chooses to include in her journal, and those she chooses to omit.

The remainder of the narrative is a third-person omniscient narration about the persons and events connected to the war of 1812 that Dolley could not know about with enough certainty to include in her journal.

This third-person narration takes on its greatest importance at the close of the novel, when, during the burning of Washington, Dolley is separated from her husband who is involved in the fighting, and, alone, saves many of the treasured artifacts of American society from the presidential mansion.

The third-person narration portrays Dolley's heroism in great detail as the stuff that legends are made of. Conversely, Dolley's fear, exhaustion, and complete modesty concerning these actions can only be read between the lines in her journal entry for 24 August 1814, Wednesday, which simply states "The doors of Hell have slipped their hinges."

The book presents itself as a novel, by virtue of its subtitle, yet the research behind the book, the bibliography that contains over a hundred entries, and the recounting of known historical events with uncanny conviction and ease seem to muddy the waters, and make a facile genre classification of this text somewhat problematic. Brown herself is acutely aware of the problems of the objective recording of history, noting in her preface that even her historical sources are of dubious integrity: ". . . there is always the problem of deciding how accurate or truthful the writer was. So many wrote after the events occurred, and they wrote with their eyes on political office. Others penned apologies for their behavior during the crisis and tried to pass it off as history." In evaluating the historical and fictional content of her own writings, Brown comments: "Nonfiction is for the facts, fiction is for the emotional truth. I have done my best to comply with the facts. You will, however, find much of the truth."

Themes

The subtitle of this book, "A Novel of Dolley Madison in Love and War" indicates several of the major themes treated in Brown in this work. The theme of history and the importance of writing history are strong concerns throughout, and dictate not only the factual framework of the novel, but also its form. The historian in this text is a woman — much of the historical background comes from the entries in Dolley's imagined journal — and a woman unique in her time who has almost unlimited access to the public and private sphere. The theme of marriage is once again explored here, but this time the portrait is a touching one. On the surface the Madisons' marriage is a partnership of a woman devoted to her husband and the causes for which he is fighting, and a hardworking politician fighting to keep the integrity of his country, with little time for family matters. Yet underneath this facade (of which Dolley prudently recognizes the value), there is a relationship of deep love, mutual respect, tolerance and understanding.

The only romantic intrigue seen in this novel stems from the rather dubious liaisons of political figures with the Madisons' maid, which gives rise to public tattle that Dolley is having affairs with various prominent ministers and cabinet members, as there are various nocturnal comings and goings in the president's mansion.

A familiar theme in Brown's contemporary fiction is that of being a woman in a man's world, a theme that is perhaps played out the most effectively in Dolley. Behind Dolley's social facade of a devoted wife and mother, brilliant hostess and meticulously dressed ornament, lurks a razor-sharp mind full of political savvy. What is interesting, though, is that unlike Brown's other female heroines, Dolley keeps this side of herself firmly under wraps, and we are constantly reminded that Dolley's great attribute is knowing the value of keeping silent.

In private she is Madison's most trusted confidante and advisor, both on the personal and political levels, and had actually replaced the president's secretary when he fell ill. It is perhaps to Brown's credit that she restrains herself from offering any kind of commentary, feminist or otherwise, on this state of affairs.

Key Questions

Unlike many of Brown's other works, Dolley contains very little in the way of sexually explicit material.

The concerns of the veracity of history as we know it, and also of women's writing of history, are sure to provoke stimulating discussions about an important and integral part of our lives, and show the importance of women's voice and actions to a nation's success.

'Those particularly concerned with political issues surrounding the presidency of the United States will find an interesting base for discussion on topics such as the dissensions within and between political parties, the political and economic considerations of war, and issues of power and loyalty. An interesting cross-cultural and crossgenre point of comparison to this novel might be the film A League of Their Own, which also shows many of the social and political repercussions of an America at war.

1. Do you think that versions of the same historical events can differ significantly depending on the gender of the historian?

2. What is the importance of the book's prologue, which includes the confrontation scene between Dolley's mother and the British soldier?

3. Given Dolley's remarkable social and political insights, can you account for her blindness to the exploits and character of her son, Payne?

4. How does the character of Uncle Willy, Dolley's macaw, add to or detract from the novel?

5. Do you think that there are particular family characteristics mentioned early in the novel that explain why both Dolley and her sister Lucy married presidents or members of a president's family?

6. Dolley's sister Anna mentions her fear that Dolley's actions, and specifically her political involvement, will be used against the president. Can you think of other cases where the first lady has been used as a weapon against her husband?

7. What do you think of the episode in which Sukey destroys part of Dolley's journal? If this is a literary device, what is its purpose?

8. Can you draw any parallels between the depiction of the American political system in this novel, and the current political climate in America?

9. Do you think the fictional element of this book makes the historical events more accessible? Try to explain why or why not.

10. Would Dolley be an effective scholastic text to teach young adults about their heritage? Are there elements which would be particularly appealing to younger readers?

Literary Precedents

In some ways, every work on American history and the nature of the presidency could function as a literary precedent for this text, but the cast that Brown puts on the tale, through looking at the woman behind the male political figure, is a less common one, and brings to mind texts such as Mark and Livy, (1992) Resa Willis's important biography of Olivia Langdon Clemens, the woman behind America's best-known author, Mark Twain. Willis's work forges another link with Brown's text, as Twain's influence on this work is again very strong, inspiring Brown to employ biting social satire to criticize the power-hungry politicians, especially those in a feedingfrenzy at the prospect of Madison's losing the war. Nor are the women spared criticism as they twitter about who is the best-dressed at Washington's social gatherings, and cultivate their spite along party lines, hoping thus ruthlessly to further their husbands' political aspirations. The format of the novel recalls in some ways Alice Walker's convincing tale of a woman's life, The Color Purple (1982), in which Celie tells her story of struggle and strength through letters to God and her absent sister Nettie during her warlike marriage to an abusive husband.

Related Titles

Although in one sense a complete departure for Brown, Dolley obviously picks up some elements of the author's style and preoccupations that can be witnessed in her earlier works. The biographical element is not entirely new to Brown's repertoire as evidenced by her thinly-veiled portrait of Martina Navratilova in her 1983 novel Sudden Death. This time, however, none of the names have been changed and the novel is strongly based in historical fact. The historical grounding and painstaking research of Dolley also forms tenuous links with Brown's 1986 novel High Hearts, a fictional love story set against the backdrop of the Civil War. This latter novel also clearly deals thematically with the concept of being a woman in a men's world, and takes the ideal of equality to its logical extreme as Geneva, the novel's heroine, dresses up as a man and joins her husband on the battlefield and in the trenches, effectively outshining many of those soldiers who are fighting by sole merit of their masculine gender.

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