The Exile Short Guide

The Exile by William Kotzwinkle

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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Kotzwinkle's protagonist is a successful actor, David Caspian, who is at the pinnacle of his career in big-budget action films. But Caspian is slowly losing his psychic identity to a kind of "double" named Felix Falkenhayn, who is living in Germany during the war. The actor has reached a point in his career where he could be complacent and repetitive (as his agent advises) or he could keep responding to the challenges of his craft. Living amid all of the temptations of a sybaritic and pampered existence, Caspian finds his family falling apart, his work becoming stale, his sense of himself disintegrating into fragments of escapist activity, and his sanity threatened by what appear to be episodes of psychic transference.

This dual existence may be a register of the schism between realities that an actor faces when he falls too deeply into his roles, but it also represents his doubts about worldly success. His apparent psychic projection into World War II Berlin is part of a plan elaborately developed on a subconscious level, forcing him to live in a setting where every decision has enormous consequences and where frivolous activity is akin to suicide.

His latest role in a space-epic called Star Rover serves as a vehicle for this transformation, suggesting that an actor is a kind of psychic sojourner (Caspian is giving the performance of a lifetime when he becomes "Felix" during takes). Caspian's visits to an incisive psychiatrist, who is trying to help him understand why "Felix" keeps appearing, give Kotzwinkle an opportunity to place a frame of reflection and intellectual investigation around a situation that will not submit to an explanation in terms of conventional, realistic narrative form.

As Caspian finds himself drawn deeper into the alternate reality of his life—his friends and coworkers all appearing in analogous form in Berlin—the focus of the narrative gradually shifts from Los Angeles to Berlin, a darkening and magnifying effect that turns the trivial nature of the squabbles in Hollywood into questions of physical and moral survival. As his life in Los Angeles seems to become increasingly irrelevant and formulaic, his life in Berlin moves toward a pitch of seriousness and consequence that seems to place his soul's integrity at stake. Conversely, his power in Los Angeles is considerable, his ability to control anything in Germany almost nonexistent. Thus, in the company of The Weasel, a postmodern man who is a product of evil at its worst but who has managed to resist evil by indirection and subversion, Caspian tries desperately to save a doomed girl (a parallel to his daughter Alica) and to rekindle the spirit of an old romance with a woman (a parallel to his wife Carol) while attempting to stay one step ahead of the Gestapo.

Paradoxically, in spite of his negligible effect on events, "Felix" is the most exciting "part" he has ever played, and the "script," which he is writing (or wringing) from some deep psychic source, is so compelling that he cannot retreat from its implications. The Weasel ingeniously turns every precept of the Nazis against them. He uses his terrible, total knowledge of evil to confound its agents while maintaining his sanity through an ability

to find the most macabre humor in transactions of terror. "Felix" follows him haltingly, his idealism subject to shock after shock. The Weasel is an accomplished criminal in a criminal's world, sustained by beating the horrormongers at their own game. He is a man whose mortality can still be preserved in an inferno of chaos and death by a kind of existential decision to control his actions in accordance with several unspoken but crucial principles. Caspian appreciates The Weasel's sang-froid and is fascinated by his endless guile—an actor's appreciation for a consummate performer who must convince his "audience" at all times or face not the end of a part but the end of his life. This challenge energizes The Weasel and exhilarates Caspian, but the same problems Caspian faces in Los Angeles ultimately occur in Berlin. Uncertainty, confusion, and lingering romantic ideals lead him to ignore the Weasel's cunning advice and place them both in an avoidable trap where the Weasel is killed and "Felix" caught by the Gestapo.

By becoming "Felix,". Caspian has touched some crucial element in his psychological structure that permits him to reach depths of emotional intensity and makes his work in Star Rover the best he has ever done. But he is unaware of what he is doing until he sees scenes from the film, and the force that has been released threatens his emotional survival. In a sense, Kotzwinkle is suggesting that this is a price an artist may have to pay, and that the willingness (or compulsion) to unleash this psychic power is what makes an artist an exile everywhere, at home only in his work.

Thus, Caspian is an "exile" in Los Angeles because he takes his work seriously, and he is a literal "exile" in Berlin because he is actually an American living in the 1980s. Most of all, he is an "exile" among people who do not share his need to explore the dangerous terrain of psychological stability.

At the conclusion of the film (and the novel), Caspian "dies" in Berlin, and "Felix" replaces him in Los Angeles. The psychological pain that Caspian has been experiencing finally pulls him completely into the realm of the subconscious where he joins "Felix" and is tortured and executed by the Nazis. The hardened Falkenhayn, on the other hand, emerges from Caspian's alternate reality and takes control of Caspian's life. The film world as Kotzwinkle portrays it is a perfect place for Falkenhayn, the manipulator who can generally control his feelings and subdue his conscience. Kotzwinkle is implying that even a moral man must have some of Falkenhayn's defensive abilities to survive in the modern world, a fact that explains the logical decision of Caspian/ Falkenhayn's mental construct to permit Falkenhayn to replace Caspian in the present. The ascendancy and triumph of Falkenhayn strikes Gaillard, the sympathetic and intelligent Jungian psychiatrist, as unfortunate evidence of Caspian's decline into complete madness, but he feels that he can still dislodge the "diabolical complex" which he thinks has taken hold of Caspian. As he stated in explaining the goal of his treatment, "Our infirmities make our soul. I'm not trying to lift you out of your pathology. I'm trying to make you comfortable with it."

The comfort has been achieved, however, at the expense of the person who originally sought it.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Exile brings the old world of decadence, corruption, and infinite cynicism into direct juxtaposition with William Kotzwinkle's new world of comic absurdity so that "past and present collide; fascist Germany and contemporary Los Angeles interpenetrate." The problem that Kotzwinkle had to solve was how to join his continuously evolving comic vision of an absurd urban society—the Los Angeles of the spaced-out 1980s—to his sinister sense of Berlin as the symbolic city of death. The linkage between Los Angeles and Berlin is developed further by Kotzwinkle's mordant satire of the film industry (which he calls "accurate reporting") and by his exceptionally vivid evocation of the atmosphere of wartime Germany, a familiar subject that is pictured in the novel with an intensity and clarity that exposes the horror and terror anew.

Techniques

Caspian is Kotzwinkle's presentation of the artist as eternal exile. Like Kafka's Hunger Artist, he can never find the nourishment he needs beyond the obsession which is destroying him; he is always out of step with the "real" or conventional world, living beyond time or lost in time, forever trying to create a "reality" in which he will find the aesthetic satisfaction that proves so elusive. It is the poignancy of this struggle that makes Caspian's predicament so disconcerting.

The films he stars in enable other people to escape from the dread of an evil or absurd existence, while to make these films effective, he has been compelled to reach into the depths of his psyche to confront evil and face absurdity with no protective psychic devices. And while this has enabled his art to grow in depth and range, it has also, ultimately, destroyed the artist himself.

Key Questions

1. How do "fascist Germany and contemporary Los Angeles interpenetrate"?

Does comic absurdism of Los Angeles conflict with the imagery of the city of death, Berlin, creating a discordant narrative?

2. What techniques does Kotzwinkle use to convey his vision of Berlin?

3. Is David Caspian's Hollywood life shallow? Does his spirit require more substance, more matters of real importance?

4. Are Caspian and Felix Falkenhayn two different people or part of a single personality?

5. Is Caspian's psychological disintegration symbolic of an actor's task?

6. What idea or set of ideas is Kotzwinkle reaching for in his often symbolic account of the psychic transference of Caspian and Falkenhayn? Do their past and present personalities provide contrasts that illuminate any social themes?

7. Is there rational explanation for Caspian's transformations into Falkenhayn?

8. What does The Weasel represent?

Have people like him actually existed?

9. Why does Felix not pay closer attention to The Weasel's warnings?

10. How many exiles are there in The Exile? What kinds of exile do they endure? What do they share in common?

11. What desires of David might Felix fulfill?

12. Do artists draw on their inner selves to create their art? Do they learn about themselves as they create art? Is that what David Caspian does?

13. Why would David sacrifice his life in Nazi Germany?

14. Do Caspian's wife and daughter need saving in Los Angeles? If so, from what?

15. Why does Gaillard think that Felix and not David is the aberration? Has he failed in his task as a psychiatrist? Does he have any hope of bringing back David?

16. Does The Weasel have any parallels in David's modern life?

17. What psychological role might The Weasel represent?

Related Titles

The initial direction of Kotzwinkle's work, from the publication of his first short stories and children's books in the 1960s, through the appearance of the ultimate counterculture cult novel The Fan Man (1974; see separate entry), and on through the novelization of Steven Spielberg's E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial in His Adventure on Earth) in 1982, has been a comic and romantic one. The zany humor that characterizes much of his writing is a crucial component of his vision of existence, and it supports a comic conception that recognizes the exigencies of existence, but suggests that an ultimate, ideal version of society is within sight if not necessarily within reach. But even from the early stages of his career, a dark, alternative strain ran close to the surface, not greatly explored but acknowledged as a factor in human affairs. In the mid1970s, Kotzwinkle began to examine this element of his vision, framing it in somewhat allegorical terms in Dr. Rat, his 1976 eco-fable that attacks the ego-centered arrogance of the human species, locating it within a historical setting in decadent, Old World cities in Fata Morgana (1977).

In each of these books, the malignancy was distanced from the modern world, both by the choice of the allegorical form in Dr. Rat and by the use of a traditional adventure/ fantasy melodrama in Fata Morgana. But in 1978, with the publication of Herr Nightingale and the Satin Woman, and even more so in 1985 with the publication of Seduction in Berlin, Kotzwinkle began to use the setting which he regards as the ultimate, archetypal location for the presence of evil, the "shadow" that inhabits us all. Calling Nazi Germany "the worst nightmare in history," Kotzwinkle's fascination with that epoch developed from a series of visits as well as his own reading of psychology and history. The first two books about Berlin in the 1930s used an extended poetic narrative similar to a Brechtian libretto to convey the spirit of a dark place in human history. By 1987, Kotzwinkle was ready to confront the face of evil directly in a novel set in the immediate present with a parallel narrative set in Germany during World War II.

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