

# **A Fan's Notes Short Guide**

## **A Fan's Notes by Frederick Exley**

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">A Fan's Notes Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>

# Characters

The narrator and central character in *A Fan's Notes* is Frederick Exley, who, although purportedly fictional, is informed by authorial experience as much as by authorial imagination.

Critical popularity of this novel owes a great deal to the irony implicit in Exley's double-duty as "fictional" protagonist and "factual" author.

Fred Exley behaves irresponsibly and irrespressibility. He is ambitious, questing — first for fame, then for sanity. Hovering always just above the genius/madness divide, Exley heroworships, faces his flaws, rails against false promise and seeks solace (or oblivion) daily at the bottom of bottles.

Inconsolable even when institutionalized for mental illness, Exley finds marriage no safe haven, either. His appetites are fierce, his disaffection and dissatisfaction profound, but Exley never points fingers or foists blame onto others. Owning an abstract, diffuse rage against the impossibility of enacting Utopian ideals, Exley accepts "responsibility" (the shame, the guilt) for being, and for being human.

Although *A Fan's Notes* also features profiles of the two people "Ex" most admires — Earl Exley and Frank Gifford — the only other noteworthy character is Bunny Sue Allorgee, a stereotyped all-American girl. But, as Adams has pointed out, "Bunny Sue's bland acceptance of his sexual impotence causes Exley to reject all that she stands for: the failure of the American Dream to rise above middle-class values, blandness, and emasculation of the American male."



## Social Concerns

Of primary interest in *A Fan's Notes* is failure — failure to thrive as a "player" in the "game" of life, failure to attain fame, to fulfill the promise of early athletic prowess, failure to be esteemed, celebrated in a culture where success proves illusory. In this novel Exley maintains the American Dream is a nightmare, seducing the unwary into despair, drugs, mental illness. He claims our cultural insistence on "winning," finishing first at all costs, is bankrupting the spirits of individuals, our moral store.

Through the vehicle of a national obsession with football, Exley (the author) ensures that Exley (the narrator) remains a fan, a spectator. That few participate while many watch from the sidelines is central to Exley's suggestion that "the game" is rigged, a romantic delusion, sure to disappoint if not destroy. Derek Mahon writes: "Exley-the-narrator seeks love and fame; like Gatsby, he believes in the green light of American romanticism, and he finds ashes. Love is blonde Bunny Sue with her butterscotch thighs . . . and her mental vacuousness. She lives at Heritage Heights, Chicago. All he can do is look. Fame, too, is for looking at, despite his ambition as a writer. It happens on TV screens; a few have fans, but most are fans of the few."



## Techniques

Exley's stratagem of writing an autobiographical novel in the guise of fiction gets at "truth" from an objectively subjective vantage point. This distancing effect proves purposeful: painfully funny events which might easily become maudlin instead amuse, retaining the tone of a confession and thereby ensuring reader empathy. The author's deliberate conflation of "historical" and "narrative" truth also sustains reader interest. We wonder: what "really" happened? What did not?

A Fan's Notes opens with the narrator watching a football game, having what he believes, at the time, to be a heart attack. The discovery that he "still has a will to live" triggers a flashback, one that recounts significant lived events leading to this moment wherein Exley, the character/narrator/author, sees himself as he imagines others do: a small-town, high school English teacher who suffers through each week for the "release" fleeing town to watch football in a neighboring, smokey, small-town lounge affords. During this retrospective prose visit, Exley traces his fascination with sports and with the onset of his alcoholism and paranoia.

# Themes

The concomitant themes of success, fame, football, and failure are magnified in *A Fan's Notes* through the narrator's revelation of unrealized potential.

Measuring his own achievements in sports against those of his father, a hometown football hero, and Frank Gifford, an all-American pro, "Ex" invariably comes up short. While yet a student at USC, he learns the horrors of anonymity even as his classmate, Gifford, rides a rising star. After graduation, the narrator seeks to be deemed a writer of fiction, a legend in the manner of Mailer, Capote, Fitzgerald and, here again, Exley knows no success. He is anxious to attain acclaim among the literati in New York City, but the "city that never sleeps" greets Exley with only indifference.

*A Fan's Notes* is a romantic book, a book about shattered dreams, despair, and the shame that can accompany an inability to fulfill a preconceived sense of self. In this novel, Exley writes: "Other men might inherit from their fathers a head for figures, a gold pocket watch all encrusted with the oxidized green of age, or an eternally astonished expression; from mine acquired this need to have my name whispered in reverential tones . . . it was my destiny — unlike that of my father, whose fate it was to hear the roar of the crowd — to sit in the stands with most men and acclaim others. It was my fate, my destiny, my end, to be a fan."

An ancillary theme in *A Fan's Notes* concerns the correspondence between physical prowess/attractiveness/success/money/masculinity on the one hand, and awkwardness/madness/ poverty/femininity, on the other. Despite his seeming desire to explode the "myth" of American equal opportunity, Exley, ironically, writes a book (about failing) that is irrefutably successful.



# Key Questions

Good departure points for discussion of *A Fan's Notes* include individual definitions of success and failure, apt measures of a well-spent life, or contemporary incarnations of the American Dream. Fruitful conversation might also arise in identifying factors that lead to fanaticism, sports-as-spiritual uplift, under achievement, and despair.

C. Barry Chabot mines the complex and anguished relationship between father and son that Exley explores in his novel. Chabot says: "Exley's father was that most pathetic of heroes, the smalltown athlete who, for one reason or another, never leaves the scene of his youthful triumphs . . . *A Fan's Notes* offers a powerful image of a boy deeply eager for [but denied] private confirmation from a loved father."

1. How do you characterize the narrator's relationship with his father?

What evidence in the text supports this characterization?

2. Describe the nature of Exley's "quest" in *A Fan's Notes*. What role does New York City play in that quest?

What role Bunny Sue? Football and fanaticism? Literature?

3. Often typed a "romantic" novel, *A Fan's Notes* does sport several conventions of romanticism. In what ways are romantic and realistic fiction opposed?

4. If you have read *The Great Gatsby*, discuss parallels apparent between *A Fan's Notes* and *The Great Gatsby*, between Fitzgerald and Exley, or between the protagonists in each novel.

5. Trace the narrative structure in this novel. What is the central conflict, if any? When does the turning point — the climax — occur? Is there resolution, or denouement?

6. How effective is Exley's decision to deliberately blur fact and fiction in *A Fan's Notes*? What effect does it have on you, the reader?

7. Describe the cultural critique — or commentary — you believe Exley makes with this novel. What familial or societal practices does he decry especially?

8. Do you identify with the character of Fred Exley in any way? If yes, how so?

## Literary Precedents

Parallels are frequently drawn between Exley's life and writing and that of F. Scott Fitzgerald; some reviewers claim closer comparisons still between *A Fan's Notes* and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). According to Adams, like Fitzgerald, Exley is concerned with "public confession of mental illness, alcoholism, and the inability to handle success." In the tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, he explores the twin themes of guilt and shame.

Exley joins contemporaneous authors Herbert Gold, Gore Vidal, and Norman Mailer in manipulating the memoir-asnovel form. His penchant for calling all drafted prose "notes" suggests the psychic incompleteness with which even his published personas must contend.

Although largely laudatory when situating Exley among writers weaned on the novels of the "lost generation," not all reviewers are unfailingly kind.

Alfred Kazin says: "like so many new American writers, [Exley] grew up on 20th century novels, he would rather be Nick Carraway than anyone else, he often confuses himself with Herzog.

Through such a film of famous characters, scenes, narrative techniques, he no longer knows his life from the book he has made of it."



## Related Titles

Seven years after *A Fan's Notes*, published in 1968, Exley continued his autobiographical trilogy with *Pages from a Cold Island* (1975). Thirteen years hence, in 1988, *Last Notes from Home* appeared. While his disclaimer in the first novel asks that it be deemed fiction, the disclaimer in *Pages from a Cold Island* asks that it be considered nonfiction, even though both novels center on the fictional/factual persona of Fred Exley. *Last Notes from Home* extends this blending and blurring of genre, and of it a reviewer for the *New York Times* says: "By failing to leave home, Exley has succeeded in his quest to make home a place on the map of American Literature."



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994