

Falconer Short Guide

Falconer by John Cheever

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Characters

Because of its prison setting, Falconer allowed Cheever the opportunity to experiment with different characters than in his previous fiction. The novel assembles a realistic cast of inmates, prison officials, and extenuating personnel, many wearing adopted names and personalities: Bumpo, Tiny, Tennis, Chicken Number Two, and the Cuckold. In his treatment of the inmate population, however, Cheever is careful to sympathetically portray the human, often tender and compassionate dimension of men imprisoned for crimes against society.

The protagonist of Falconer is Ezekiel Farragut, husband, father, brother, and murderer. Characteristic of other Cheever protagonists, Farragut is a displaced innocent in a hostile, foreign environment. However, having suffered marital stress and brotherly rivalry, Farragut is generously uncharacteristic in his drug addiction, sexual deviance, and propensity for self-destruction.

Soundly beaten down by the complexities of his existence, Farragut is searching for a sense of renewal, a rebirth of self-esteem. The journey toward actualizing his rejuvenation is both arduous and painful, but joyous in completion. He suffers the agonies and brutality of drug withdrawal but experiences a previously unknown sensation in his love for Jody, his homosexual lover. In the end, while offering his confession to a dying inmate, Farragut is emotionally absolved of his guilt and released of his paralyzing self-pity. Escaping in the dead prisoner's burial shroud, Farragut symbolically emerges cleansed and purified to take his rightful place in the world.

Undoubtedly a target of animosity and one of Cheever's least sympathetic characters is Farragut's wife Marcia.

She is portrayed in the novel as being both narcissistic and vindictive. Unloving during their marriage, after Farragut's imprisonment, her bitterness turns to hatefulness and cruelty. Yet another in a long line of emasculating females in Cheever's fiction, Marcia is contrasted with Jody who is treated with sensitivity and affection.

Jody provides Farragut with the essential elements to his survival: hope, enlightenment, and the will to persevere.



Social Concerns/Themes

Strikingly different from his previous work, *Falconer* both surprised and startled readers when it first appeared in 1977. Set in Falconer Prison, the novel represented a radical departure from the standardized Cheever territory of urban and suburban terrain.

According to Cheever, the novel's chosen subjects are defined as "incarceration, homosexuality, and addiction."

Consequently, drawing heavily on his teaching experience at Sing Sing prison in the early 1970s, Cheever creates in *Falconer* a realistic portrayal of prison existence, using the setting as a literary metaphor for the concept of confinement as an abstract state of mind.

The novel revolves around the central character of Ezekiel Farragut, a forty-eight-year-old college professor convicted of murdering his brother.

Although Cheever had on several previous occasions explored the complex and often strained relationships between brothers, this was the first incident of fratricide in his fiction. Several themes interact within the novel including the violence and extent of human degradation realized by Farragut as a prisoner, the inherent importance of individuality and free association, and the necessity of love as an intricate means for survival.

Certainly Cheever's own confinement for treatment of alcoholism which resulted in a spiritual rebirth of creativity and reaffirmation of religion is partially responsible for Farragut's characterization and the religious overtones throughout the novel. Farragut has committed a crime against his fellow man but seeks and finds redemption in renewed self-worth, a homosexual affair with another inmate, and his ultimate acceptance of faith.

Techniques

Although written in his familiar prose style, *Falconer* is uncharacteristic of Cheever in relation to both tone and diction. The novel is laced throughout with obscene and profane language as well as realistic narrative detailing with graphic accuracy both life and death in *Falconer Prison*. Cheever dissects his characters with antiseptic clarity, gracing their lives with moments of lyrical brilliance while vividly depicting the unmeasured price of imprisonment.

Most descriptive, and consequently shocking to numerous readers, was Cheever's treatment of homosexuality and sexual pervasiveness within the novel. Although much of his previous work ranged in context from sexual innuendo to unequivocal passion, never before had Cheever presented the subject with such raw objectivity.

As a result, his ability to transcribe the sexual fantasies realized by men in prison was at once the novel's most controversial element and greatest artistic achievement.



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