False Memory Short Guide

False Memory by Dean Koontz

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Characters

Koontz's great skill lies in his ability to create credible, likable characters who are caught up in incredible situations that test the limits of their love and reason.

In False Memory the hero and heroine are Dustin (Dusty) and Martine (Martie) Rhodes, a happily married couple, affectionate and loving, whose world comes apart, whose friends and acquaintances are killed or injured, whose comfortable home is burnt to the ground, and whose sanity they themselves question. Dusty is a house painter and Martiea video-game designer. Both are hard-working, witty, compassionate, and personable. They watch out for their friends and go out of their way to help them in times of need. Martie spends time helping her friend Susan, once a successful realestate agent, deal with a debilitating case of agoraphobia, a paralyzing fear of open spaces, of traveling between houses and buildings. Marie drives Susan to psychiatric appointments, purchases food for her, and runs a number of errands for her daily.

Dusty, in turn, actually takes a high dive from a roof to a mattress below to save his suicidal half-brother Skeet from certain death.

Yet, Martie seems to have developed autophobia—a fear of herself and the horrors she might unintentionally inflict on those she loves, most particularly, Dusty.

This innovatively imagined disease is very much an absurdist extension of modern paranoia: oneself as a danger to be feared.

Both Dusty and Martie have had terrible dreams that haunt their waking hours, Dusty of a blue heron that enters his body and possesses his soul, Martie of a sinister presence expressed in a whirl of autumn leaves that invades her body and smothers her will to live. Normally wary of psychiatrists, both have been programmed to turn to the renowned therapist who has been treating their friend Susan to discover the reasons for Martie's sudden mental chaos. However, when Dusty realizes that Martie's description of a book she has been reading (The Manchurian Candidate) sounds programmed, he begins a process of inquiry that leads him to the shocking truth: brainwashing, as in Richard Condon's novel.

This knowledge sends them seeking information in Santa Fe, where their fears are confirmed and where Martie must use her wits and her shooting skills to save them from Ahriman's murderous henchmen. In a crisis both Dusty and Martie prove competent and tough; they do what has to be done to protect each other and defeat Ahriman.

Before they fully understood their plight, their friend Susan Jagger left them a critical phone message that saved them from disaster. She had helped Ahriman get a deal on a house he purchased, only to succumb unknowingly to his twisted desires. Ash blonde with a trim and delicate figure, she is stunningly beautiful/both strong and vulnerable. Since meeting Ahriman her marriage and her life have fallen apart; her phobia has begun and worsened, and she has started to imagine that someone enters her locked

door, sexually abuses her, and then leaves, the only sign of his presence the semen he leaves in her panties. However, she has been programmed to believe the perpetrator is her estranged husband Eric, and when she tries to capture him on a camcorder tape hidden behind a Ming vase, she discovers the real villain is Ahriman. By then, however, it is too late, for in replaying one of their sessions, he grows suspicious of her responses, returns unexpectedly, sees the tape, and orders her to slash her own wrists after writing a despairing suicide note. The power of his psychological control (through a sophisticated mixture of drugs and brainwashing methods) is such that, though she sheds a tear as she bleeds to death, she is powerless to disobey. The crime scene looks like a suicide, and the police have no reason to think otherwise, but Dusty has heard Susan's taped phone message and knows her death is a murder.

Dr. Mark Ahriman is, of course, the key villain, a sociopath from his youth who chose his profession because of the control it would give him over others and the respectable facade it would provide for his blood cravings. As a youth, he found the opposite sex both compelling and disturbing. As an adult, he seeks to gratify his sexual desires without the necessity of establishing a human relationship, for all too often his experience has been one of rejection, of women seeing through to the heart of him and turning away. Dusty and Skeet's mother, Claudette, had twisted an emotional knife in his youthful ego by seducing him and then repeatedly reminding him that the child their liaison produced suffered from Down's Syndrome, a defect from his side of the family, not hers. Ahriman's hidden persona is that of an adolescent, a voyeuristic teenager with a craving for quick gratification and dominance. He collects rare cars and relishes violent computer games in which he pits Nazi soldiers against the Mafia, alien spacemen, and the like, in an odd amalgam of historical and futuristic fantasies of conquest. The doctor studies the formaldehyde-preserved eyes he surgically removed from the movie director father he had murdered, hoping to see the secret of his father's success with women and his easily evoked tears. Unable to shed tears himself, Ahriman's pleasure comes from the tears of his victims and from the secrecy of his true role in so many public events: a mother who shoots her husband and son and then herself; a five-year-old child who loads a gun, undresses, and shoots herself through her vagina; a beautiful, modest woman who believes Ahriman is her father as he repeatedly rapes her. His arrogant overconfidence, however, ultimately proves his undoing.

Dusty's young half-brother Skeet Caulfield (his father had legally changed his own name to Holden Caulfield) is also an Ahriman target and, as the novel begins, Skeet tries to throw himself from a roof as Ahriman had programmed him to do. Skeet is high on drugs and claims he has seen the Angel of Death inviting him to experience the wonders of the next world, but his brother's fast action saves him. Later, Dusty again comes to Skeet's rescue in the psychiatric ward where Ahriman plans to reprogram him for death. Skeet is a damaged human being, befuddled by the drugs that his parents used to control his behavior as a child and by the drugs that he now takes to escape the hard edges of reality. His growing friendship with Fig Newton, a house painter who works with Dusty and who takes Skeet under his protection while Dusty gathers evidence against Ahriman, saves Skeet's life a third time and leads to a new career for

him once he has recovered from the bullet of the "Keanuphobe" millionairess who thinks he is a robot working for the Ahriman "matrix."

Social Concerns

C alled "America's most popular suspense novelist" by Rolling Stone magazine, Dean Koontz demonizes authority figures who irresponsibly abuse their power and, under the guise of giving aid, injure and destroy. He normally focuses on government and corporate conspiracies, particularly ones involving biological experimentation that advances unchecked, but in False Memory he concentrates on a psychiatrist who practices brainwashing for diabolical personal motives and holier-thanthou academics whose ludicrous theories damage young people and lead to destructive patterns of behavior. His villains always have in common their willingness to play God, to experiment on the innocent, and to unleash nightmares with no care for the consequences. Koontz does not trust professions whose members see themselves as superior to the rest of humanity because he believes that arrogance and personal smugness lead to a contempt for humanity that invariably works itself out in dangerous patterns. Ironically, the villain in False Memory speculates on the "brave new millennium," Koontz's reminder to readers of the programming Aldous Huxley warned might come in Brave New World, and he proudly asserts that power trumps truth any day.

Koontz's most terrifying villain is a respected psychiatrist, Dr. Mark Ahriman, who enjoys controlling his patients and testing those controls. He is a megalomaniac and a sadist who has killed his father and then literally drilled through the heart of his father's live-in girlfriend. He keeps his father's eyes in a jar in a secret room at home, as well as tapes of some of his more sinister deeds. Yet, to all appearances he is a handsome, charming expert, kindly and concerned, and willing to sacrifice his private time for the needs of his patients.

When he lived in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he used his position of trust and authority to implant a false memory in a child whose mother had come to him for treatment, a memory that led the child to accuse adults in a child care center of physically abusing him. Then, as the local psychiatric expert called in to use hypnotism and psychiatric forms of regression to test the memories of the other children in the center, he supposedly helped them regain detailed memories of such abuse. In fact, the accused adults were innocent, and the vivid memories of the children were false memories implanted to boost Ahriman's reputation, just as he had engineered the suicide of a child to seem like irrefutable proof of wrongdoing.

Again and again Dr. Ahriman experiments on patients to test his own theories and wreak mayhem for the sheer pleasure of doing so. He betrays his female clients, using his brain control methods to make them sexually pliable and then to erase their memories of the perverse and degraded behavior he demands of them; when he is tired of these excesses, he might program a patient to kill his or her entire family and then commit suicide, just for the pleasure of causing pain and destruction. He sets in motion a complicated scheme involving brainwashing of several members of one family in order to get revenge on a university professor who has publicly mocked his books and professionalism in dozens of petty ways. Furthermore, he has helped found a

corporation that employs these brainwashing strategies to produce assassins on demand—for a very high price.

The university professor who awakens Ahriman's ire, Derek Lampton, is himself an object of Koontz's social criticism. Koontz does not trust university professors, especially ones in the sciences and social sciences (like sociology). He finds them as a group arrogant, self-convinced snobs, capable of cold-hearted viciousness. Derek Lampton is typical. His power-hungry wife, Claudette, adores him for the heights of academic fame he has achieved, and he wickedly delights in rapier-thrust witticisms directed against his academic competition.

Even more damning from Koontz's point of view is the effect of this attitude on Lampton's son, who at three years old was a promising child but who has been spoiled and pampered and taught that there are no rules.

The son, at age fifteen, has become a selfish, destructive sadist who, near the end of the novel, shoots an intruder dead with his crossbow. The man had been disarmed and knocked down so there was no need for such extreme measures, but the boy sees an opportunity to kill and get away with it and does so. His parents rally around him, praising him for his quick thinking and telling the police that the lad has saved them all—behavior that confirms him in his deviant ways and paves the way for another amoral sociopath like Dr. Ahriman. A final revelation places Claudette at the center of Koontz's attack, for, in addition to satisfying her cravings for fame and power in her ambitions for her son and husband and nurturing their egotism and their anti-social behavior, she smothered to death her first daughter (Ahriman's child) because of the possibility of Down's Syndrome and tried to smother her son Skeet, whose problem with drugs and a lack of self-esteem are her fault. Furthermore, her biting attacks on Ahriman's bad genes and her encouragement of Lampton to attack Ahriman's scholarship are what set in motion his murderous schemes for revenge. Thus, Koontz's social concerns are rooted in the individuals whom society places on pedestals and in his fear of the devastating effects of such misplaced trust.

Techniques

Koontz mixes the techniques of the amateur detective story, the psychological thriller, the tale of horror and suspense, the political thriller, and the social protest novel. Koontz's attack on academic frauds and his portraits of wealthy Californian types verge on satire, and his characters' analysis of and reflections on haiku are a twisted form of literary criticism. His villain stalks his victims and gloats over their bizarre and twisted deaths; he cuts off body parts, communes with coyotes, and reverts to a childish personality when in the midst of depraved acts. The narrator unveils a variety of phobias, of drug responses, and of obsessions that warp character and deed. His victims and heroes are afflicted by grotesque night mares, waking compulsions, fear and loathing, psychotic fugues, and suicidal impulses.

The brainwashing strategies he explores are straight out of the spy story and, in this tale, are used, in part, for political ends: to force the president to bow to political interest groups. The hero and heroine look within themselves for clues that will help them understand the horror that has rocked their lives; Dusty also follows the clues in The Manchurian Candidate to deduce Ahriman's method, and he and Martie travel to Santa Fe to interview witnesses and trace motives and means. Their logical reasoning and their intuition guide them to the truth about who, what, and why. This story is a romance as well, for its hero and heroine cling to their love as the steadfast rock that enables them to endure and overcome when all the world seems mad. Then there is the inevitable animal story, for Koontz is a devoted dog lover, and Valet is a kindly Golden Retriever, gentle and obedient, loving and playful, a balm to injured psyches.

He is too gentle to injure the villain, but his presence reassures; Valet is, as Koontz affirms through Dusty, "almost as good for the soul as prayer." Most of all, however, False Memory is a psychological suspense story that explores the ability of the human mind to torment and destroy not just the vulnerable and the weak, but the seemingly strong and self-confident.

Koontz is a skilled stylist, a master of strategies for building horror and suspense.

He carefully layers his plot through an intricate contrapuntal design that heightens tension. Like Frederick Forsythe's technique, Koontz's trademark structural pattern is to alternate between sets of characters, first Skeet and Dusty, then Martie and Suzanne, then Dr. Ahriman and Susan, and so on, building his story a bit at a time. As Ahriman engages in more and more horrific practices, as Susan's life is threatened and then ended, and as Dusty and Martie begin to discover the nightmare within themselves, Koontz moves back and forth from suspenseful moment to suspenseful moment (Martie having a panic attack, Dusty struggling to protect her, Susan being physically abused, Ahriman suspecting her responses) so that the reader is led to read faster and faster as the suspense, tension, and potential for disaster build and accelerate. As Martie collapses into a drugged sleep, her phone rings repeatedly: it is Susan, desperate to pass on her discovery of Ahriman's betrayals, reaching out to her friend one final time before Ahriman asserts control and punishes her terminally for her knowledge. This

suspenseful alternating between sets of characters and sets of action hurtles the plot forward as the danger builds to frightening heights and the atmosphere becomes more menacing. One seeming climax is followed by another until evil is routed in unexpected ways.

Another Koontz trademark is his movement between physical surface action and psychological action to capture the way in which people are trapped by their imaginings, by the dark side of obsessive behavior.

For example, while Susan and Martie talk on the phone, their conversation is punctuated by the nightmare obsessions that have begun to afflict Martie. Susan reveals the facts that have led her to conclude that someone is breaking into her locked room, having rough sex with her, and then leaving in such away that the room seems totally safe and secure; despite Susan's desperation and the disturbing possibilities of her situation, Martie's responses are distant, for her mind is fixed on the sounds of household objects inviting her to acts of violence: the klick-klick of snipping scissors echoes again and again as Martie imagines them calling out to her from the desk drawer, inviting her with their gleaming blades, pivoting against each other, to slash and pierce.

Related to this technique is one that is a tour de force in this novel: a catalog of the violent potential of household goods and products extended sporadically over more than one hundred and fifty pages as readers see through Martie's crazed vision.

Ahriman had programmed Martie to become obsessed with plunging some weapon into Dusty's blue eyes and in some way killing him, and Koontz captures Martie's psychotic fears of engaging in such violent acts with the weapons at hand. Thus, everything she sees as she goes from room to room, she sees in terms of its potential as a tool of destruction—in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the bedroom, in the living room, in the garage. The knives, scissors, rolling pins, hammers, pry bars, hedge trimmers, spading forks, fireplace poker, knitting needles, and other such tools come alive in her imagination. She sees in a car key and a corkscrew the potential for gouging and slashing eyes, in a wine bottle and a vase solid, blunt, effective skull crackers, and even in potato peelers and corncob holders, cheese graters and spoons objects for ripping, tearing, scraping, and thrusting.

Koontz's descriptions are often tonguein-cheek or reflect a certain offbeat sense of humor. Construction worker Ned Motherwell produces books of haiku with titles like Ladders and Brushes, while another member of Dusty's construction team, Fig Newton, makes a fortune with Skeet on "Strange Phenomena Tours," which follow the trail of Big Foot, explore the sites of the most famous alien abductions, track Elvis's postmortem wanderings, and so on. Ahriman often sees the world with a peculiar twist, for example, labeling his would-be trackers "the two idiot nephews of Miss Jane Marple" and thinking that they would have been blind to him even if he had been atop "a Rose Parade float, wearing a Carmen Miranda banana hat." Just before he is shot to death, Ahriman obsesses over how Skeet, shot four times in the abdomen, could have staggered six to eight miles in over eighteen hours to point a blood-stained finger of accusation at him.

Themes

Koontz explores the social dynamics that produce sociopaths. More than anything else he blames families: self-obsessed parents who finance their offspring's every whim but who are completely indifferent to their child's psychological needs or cold, selfish parents for whom the child is a reflection of their own dreams and wishes, clay to be molded into whatever the parents want most—a miniature image of themselves, a genius who will bring them accolades, a social climber who will help them rise to the top. However, Skeet and Dusty share the same mother, and both had arrogant, selfish fathers or step-fathers, yet they both seem to have been born with good hearts and have resisted and rebelled against their parental models, so the individual, asserts Koontz, has some degree of free will in the matter. Skeet is the weaker of the two and has succumbed to drug abuse and selfdestructive acts, but Koontz does not make clear how much this is a result of both his step-father's belief in medication as a panacea for wayward children and Dr. Ahriman's tampering with Skeet's psyche through brainwashing techniques.

Directly connected with this theme is the question of responsibility to one's community. Martie Rhodes's father is a model of community service. A fireman nicknamed Smilin' Bob, he risked his life time and again to rescue men, women, and children threatened by fire. Martie's recurring image is of him in his firefighter's uniform wading into the midst of a blaze, black smoke billowing up around him to pull out a child others had missed. Remembered too is his modesty, his refusal to accept special awards and medals for just doing his job.

Though at the time the book begins he is dead from cancer, he lives on in the memories of his daughter, inspiring her with his strength and courage. During his lifetime, he had instilled in her the attitude of selfsacrifice that enables her to stand up against adversity and fears of personal madness and to struggle through to the truth. Clearly, Koontz believes that deeds count more than words and that parental behavior provides models that children imitate—for good or for ill. Smilin' Bob's public image, confirmed in his private persona, sets a standard for Martie to follow. In her moments of despair, Martie gains security from an almost supernatural sense of Smilin' Bob's spiritual presence, guarding her from evil.

Even in the worst of times, she hangs on to the memory of her father's heroism and the strength of her love for Dusty to help her overcome the destructive fantasies Ahriman implanted in her subconscious.

Offsetting the villainous Dr. Ahriman is the genuinely kindly and concerned Dr.

Closterman, a physician who truly cares about his patients and who distrusts Ahriman's smug arrogance. Though he has no concrete evidence against Ahriman, he is brave enough to warn the Rhodeses that something is awry and to support their story to the police once Ahriman is killed.

Yet his hesitation to take on Ahriman suggests another recurring Koontz theme: the inability of good people to stand up publicly and credibly against well placed villains with academic credentials and high community standing.

Koontz's message is a democratic one: the ordinary working men and women in his stories are decent folk, who, despite sometimes rough exteriors, stand by their friends in times of trouble. Although they suffer the brunt of the evil and darkness that plagues Koontz's world, they somehow endure and ultimately thrive. The wealthy, in contrast, are always suspect in his stories, tainted somehow by the deeds it took for them to climb to the top. It is their own misdeeds that bring out the rage of the psychopaths, a fact they forever refuse to admit. At the end of False Memory, the wealthy psychopath who kills Ahriman has good lawyers who assure her no jail time and more sympathy than reprimand, and she remains at large to possibly kill again, immune to the punishments the law would exact on poorer citizens.

A southern Californian, Koontz finds eccentricities of lifestyle undisturbing as long as private obsessions do not produce negative public ramifications. However, when eccentricity turns kinky and takes violent forms, Koontz draws the line.

Ultimately, False Memory explores the power of fear to paralyze the mind and damn the body but also the power of love and friendship to provide a strong bulwark, a defense against "outrageous fortune."

Key Questions

Dean Koontz combines deep pessimism with unexpected optimism. His villains are horrifyingly evil despite their respectable facades, while his good characters are vulnerable and at times terrified but have an expected strength that helps them survive hard times and ultimately prevail. His vision of present and near future realities is a postmodernist one: terrifying, bleak, alienated. At the same time, friendship, love, and the companionship of dogs transform the world into a place of personal warmth and hope.

1. What qualities do characters like Zina and Chase Glyson and Martie and Dusty Rhodes share that are lacking in Koontz's villains?

2. Name the villains (besides Ahriman) and explain what qualities Koontz criticizes in them.

3. How does Koontz's introduction of the Bellon-Tockland Institute in Santa Fe broaden his warning about the pathologies of secretive corporations engaged in private scientific research?

4. What final events suggest truth is vindicated?

5. What final events warn that the battle for truth and goodness is never fully won?

6. Find two examples of Koontz's humor.

What exactly is humorous about them?

Is the humor a positive or a negative experience? Is it black humor? Satiric humor? Or good-natured?

7. Watch the movie, The Manchurian Candidate. How many parallels can you find between the movie and Koontz's novel?

8. Are there any indications that Ahriman wants to be caught or is he simply so arrogant that he believes precautions are truly unnecessary? List the mistakes he makes that a careful police investigation could uncover and use against him. What mistakes enable Dusty and Martie to outwit him?

9. What is the significance of the title?

Literary Precedents

False Memory breaks the boundaries of genre classification. It is in the detective fiction tradition of the amateur who ferrets out crime where the professionals see none, with Koontz's interesting addition that makes his detective also an unwitting victim, with the clues to events locked away in his own subconscious. More particularly, the novel is in the subgenre of the mass murder/serial killer story. Mass murderers are more often the subject of thriller/horror stories than tales of detection because their focus is on the mad impulses that lead to insane acts of mass violence; while the villain of Koontz's novel is led by mad impulses to insane acts of violence and kills untold numbers of people, he kills them one at a time instead of en masse. Thus, he is more properly labeled a serial killer; and serial killers are very much a staple of the detective genre, from the early stories of Jack the Ripper (including Marie Belloc Lowndes' classic thriller, The Lodger, 1913) to the more recent Hannibal Lector stories like The Silence of the Lambs to Caleb Carr's The Alienist and Michael Connelly's A Darkness More Than Night. Authors such as John Harvey and Patricia D. Cornwell concentrate on the murderers' psychopathologies and the medical and forensic knowledge that lead to their undoing. Koontz is more interested in the psychological trauma experienced by the victims and the sadism and lunacy of the victimizer. Koontz calls attention to the limits of the serial killer mystery subgenre through a detective story Susan and Martie discuss, one in which it is the nun, not the butler, who is the murderer— and a serial murderer at that, with ax, hammer, wire garrote, acetylene torch, and nail gun. The murder of Susan Jagger is a locked room mystery, on the pattern of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Wilkie Collins's "A Terribly Strange Bed," Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mystery "The Adventures of the Speckled Band," and Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13."

At the same time, Koontz intentionally builds on the pattern of Richard Condon's espionage thriller The Manchurian Candidate, in which brainwashing methods are used to create and control a political assassin. In a parody of the Condon story, one of Koontz's brainwashed characters is programmed to bite off the nose of the American president in order to convince the president to follow the mandates of shadowy figures manipulating political events from behind the scenes. In both Koontz and Condon's novels, a cruel and politically ambitious mother is responsible for her son's brainwashing, and in both a psychological trigger sets in motion behavior over which the individual has no control. To this source book, Koontz adds the Keanu Reeves movie The Matrix to bring in the paranoid possibility of programming that totally overrides reality and replaces it with a fantasy world, a computer construct with no foundation in reality. Finally, Koontz taps into the dark paranoia, the fear of conspiracies and plots exploited in Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 and in so many other postmodernist novels. The common parent of such works is, of course, Franz Kafka.

Related Titles

Dean Koontz's canon consists of novels much like False Memory, story after story of the world turned upside down, of deceptive appearances, of conspiracies and plots that make ordinary citizens fear they have entered a realm of madness from which there is no escape. Such paranoid fantasies have become the stuff of modern fiction.

John Sanford's The Devil's Code (2000) is typical of the tradition in which Koontz works. It features a vast electronic conspiracy that involves both a large technological corporation and a cadre of U.S. government bureaucrats who use technology and their vast resources to cover up murders and to blackmail prominent citizens, but who are ultimately defeated by a renegade band of hackers and telephone wizards.

At the same time, Koontz also writes in the Stephen King tradition of frightening psychological horrors, though with Koontz these horrors ultimately have a solid grounding in real acts. John Saul's Nightshade (2000), a macabre and terrifying tale of a household torn apart by malevolent forces from within, including child abuse, torture, and deadly dreams, is in the tradition of this other aspect of Koontz's novels.

A psychological mystery focused on a serial killer, Jonathan Kellerman's Monster (1999), like Koontz's novel, depicts a serial killer who thinks he can outwit authorities.

However, in Kellerman's novel consulting psychologist Alex Delaware is the detective hero, not the villain, and he uses his training to unlock the secrets in the minds of the victims rather than to create secrets and to lock up memory. In this case the hacked-up body of a woman psychologist has been found abandoned in a car trunk, one of a series of murders like those committed by Ardis "Monster" Peake, who is imprisoned in the Starkweather State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. "Monster" had brutally murdered his mother and the family she worked for and had ripped out their eyes, but has been too heavily drugged and too carefully guarded to have committed the two recent murders. Jeffrey Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme novels, Bone Collector (1997), The Coffin Dancer (1998), and The Empty Chair (2000) all deal with the forensic evidence that guides a paraplegic detective to a serial killer. However, unlike Koontz, Rhyme focuses on the careful scientific analysis of crime scene physical evidence rather than on the victim's terror and the killer's craft.

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