

The Fan Club Short Guide

The Fan Club by Irving Wallace

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Characters

Glamorous movie star Sharon Fields is abducted by four men who profess to be her fan club. They are an unattractive quartet, contrasting pairs of sexually immature males. Adam Malone (who has the idea to kidnap Sharon) fantasizes about movie stars but is unable to consummate a relationship with a real woman. His opposite is Kyle Shively (a Vietnam veteran guilty of murdering civilians) who gets sexual thrills by degrading women.

Howard Yost (an insurance salesman bored by wife and job) craves the excitement of sexual novelty. His opposite is Leo Brunner (an accountant too timid to admit boredom with wife or job): Suffering from reduced libido, he must feign lust to match his companions'.

The Fan Club offers no male character whose sex life is under control or in balance. A Wallace novel typically features a male protagonist who moves from sexual dysfunction to sexual fulfillment, but here only Malone approaches normalcy. Sharon's sensual skills enable Malone to consummate a relationship, but after Sharon's escape, he returns to the fantasy of the movie screen and creates a new fan club about a rising starlet.

At first, Sharon is no more attractive a personality than her captors. All her life Sharon has manipulated men by her beauty. Ironically she is kidnapped just when she decides to stop using sensuality as a tool. Famous and rich enough to achieve independence, Sharon contemplates for the first time a mature relationship with a man. She proves a resourceful captive, gifted intellectually as well as physically.

Ingeniously she learns the location of her captivity and alerts the police through a code. Sharon ultimately takes personal revenge; cold-bloodedly she herself executes Shively, the most ruthless of the kidnappers.

Social Concerns

Between 1960 and 1975 America seemed to become a more dangerous place. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King seemed to make murder an extension of American politics by other means. Hostage-taking became the terrorists' weapon for getting publicity and the criminals' best means of escaping pursuit. In February 1974, newspaper heiress Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the underground group the Symbionese Liberation Army, an act which made clear that celebrities were vulnerable targets. There were increasing incidents of famous people stalked by mentally unbalanced fans.

Hearst's fate was still unknown two months later when *The Fan Club* was published. The novel describes the kidnap of Hollywood's reigning sex goddess, Sharon Fields, by four men.

Once again Wallace chooses as his central plot a situations as timely as the day's newspaper headlines.

Techniques

The first half of *The Fan Club*, like *The Prize* (1962), interweaves multiple stories. The reader follows the formation of the club as each man's individual sexual disappointments gradually lead him to join the conspiracy.

The next quarter of the novel concentrates in clinical detail on Sharon's repeated ravishment at an isolated cabin. The last quarter flashes between Hollywood where Sharon's rescuers search for clues and the cabin where the abductors' harmony rapidly breaks down.

Wallace attempts one narrative variation: Parts of the story are told through "Adam Malone's Notebook."

Written in the first person by the club's historian, the notebook takes the reader through Adam's passionate, disturbed mind. These passages are chilling juxtapositions of logical thought and bizarre fantasies. Unfortunately the notebook selections are brief, randomly placed, and underused.

The Fan Club, like all Wallace novels, benefits from the author's attention to setting and detail. Carefully the novelist lays out first the abductors' plan to seize Sharon and then the police efforts to find her. The details reflect Wallace's habit of visiting the places where the fictional action occurs and envisioning the events step by step.

Themes

Initial reviewers found *The Fan Club* preposterous as well as tasteless. They objected to a plot in which four sexually frustrated males abduct a film star in hope that she will act out their erotic fantasies. When Sharon refuses, they rape and brutalize her. Hoping to weaken or divide her jailers, she decides to cooperate. Soon satiated with sex, the kidnappers now demand a ransom for the actress's release. Their plan is foiled by the captive's cleverness; three of the men are killed as the police move in.

As sensational as the plot is, Wallace explores several serious dimensions of sexuality. The four captors are presented as a cross-section of American males whose sexual psychology is the product of the influence of popular media such as men's magazines and movies. An epigraph from Samuel Johnson signals this theme: "Were it not for imagination, sir, a man would be as happy in the arms of a chambermaid as of a duchess." The novel also shows a powerful male sex drive overriding every other emotion: love, greed, ambition, pride, even common sense. The theme is sounded in a second epigraph, this one from Henry David Thoreau: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

A third epigraph from Marilyn Monroe expresses the power of male assumptions about female sexuality: "People take a lot for granted and expect an awful lot for very little. A sex symbol becomes a thing. I just hate to be a thing." That hatred will give Sharon the energy to fight her captors and use their expectations against them.

Adaptations

Columbia Pictures bought the movie rights to *The Fan Club* in 1979. Despite several starts, no production has gotten far.



Key Questions

Before they agree to read *The Fan Club*, group members need to be aware that it contains four scenes of rape and numerous sexual encounters. Readers whose views of sex are primarily sentimental and romantic will probably find the novel too graphic. The absence of a positive yet passionate love relationship makes the sexual atmosphere very dark.

1. Many heroines in modern fiction are sexually experienced, but few match the number or frequency of Sharon's liaisons during her effort to escape. Does Sharon's energetic sexuality make it difficult for most readers to accept her as a heroine?
2. The relationship between Sharon and Adam is the closest one to a romantic relationship. What is the basis of their intimacy? What are its unbridgeable limitations?
3. Despite his relationship with Sharon, is Adam insane? Does Wallace entrap readers into sympathizing with him simply because he is not as brutal or stupid as the other kidnappers?
4. What stereotypes of male sexual immaturity do Brunner and Yost embody? What factors have shaped their immaturity? Does Wallace give them convincing histories?
5. What motivates Shively? Is Sharon the sexual object to him that she is to Adam, Brunner and Yost? If she is not a sexual object, what kind of object is she?
6. In her self-examination Sharon concludes that she has sexually exploited men all her life as her kidnappers exploit her. Do you agree with the comparison? To what extent is Sharon responsible for creating the persona that attracts her tormentors?
7. Is Sharon's star persona as an actress a typical Hollywood image? In Sharon's case, is the persona freely chosen or forced upon her by the profession? Does it matter which?
8. The concept of poetic justice in literature encourages an author to give each character his/her moral due at the end of the work. Is the principle at work in *The Fan Club*? Do all characters receive poetic justice? Does Wallace properly give everyone their just due?
9. Is Sharon's victory at the conclusion as much a female fantasy as the *Fan Club*'s expectation of erotic delight is a male fantasy at the beginning?
10. What is the place of sexually explicit novels like *The Fan Club* in popular fiction? Given the controversy in various parts of the U.S. regarding banning books, are you willing to argue that *The Fan Club*, and some other erotic literature, has redeeming social value?



Literary Precedents

The abduction and captivity of a maiden is a common motif in folklore: "Beauty and the Beast," "Rapunzel," and numerous others. Sometimes she is held for ransom by thieves; sometimes incarceration is a prelude to forced marriage to a monstrous or evil lover; sometimes her plight is a test of her character. The motif apparently derives from the practice of bride-stealing in ancient civilizations where courtship or arranged marriage failed to gain a man the wife of his choice. The symbolism of the captive princess is powerful: she represents the ideal of female stature as well as the political future of the kingdom. How she withstands the rigors of captivity demonstrates the power of her gender and worthiness as a regal model. Whether she is raped, seduced, or willingly marries her abductor predicts the future decline or prosperity of the society.

The motif of the imprisoned maiden is reflected in the beginnings of the novel as an art form. Samuel Richardson, often acknowledged as the first English novelist, based his first two works on the motif. In *Pamela* (1740) the story ends happily. The virtuous serving girl Pamela is held incommunicado by her master; she fights off rape and resists seduction. Impressed by her indomitable spirit, the lord falls in love and proposes marriage despite the social gap between them. In *Clarissa* (1748) the story ends tragically. Literally locked in her room unless she agrees to marry her parent's choice, a loathsome suitor, Clarissa flees with another suitor who pretends to love her. He rapes her and mortally wounds her spirit, but instantly he regrets his actions. His protests of love are now unavailing, however. Unable to survive the violation of her soul, Clarissa dies.

In these tales Richardson perfected the "principle of procrastinated rape:"

readers continue on chapter after chapter to discover the sexual fate of the heroine.

Wallace skillfully adapts this folklore motif. As a movie star, Sharon is a modern American princess. She is held for a ransom that is more psychological than financial: to fulfill the erotic fantasies of her captors. Her abduction is a prelude to forced intimacy and deceitful compliance with men who are murderous, manipulative, or mad. Her captivity forces an examination of self and conscience from which she emerges determined to live. Wallace also updates the principle of procrastinated raped by making sexual violence much more vivid than Richardson did. Wallace allows his contemporary heroine the full measure of revenge: she kills one of her captors and sees two others slain, retribution usually denied to folklore princesses and eighteenth-century maidens. The motif of the abducted woman has taken on particular importance since the arrival of gender-based criticism. The lineage in literature from noble princess, to permissive princess to wronged woman, to sexual tease, to sex kitten, to porn queen has blurred the function of abduction as purification ritual, rite of passage, or justification for revenge.

But abduction is an ancient and important aspect of literature that has been extensively explored through Jungian and Freudian psychology, and which manifests itself in many forms in popular fiction.



Related Titles

The Fan Club is the fifth of six Wallace novels with sexual behavior as its explicit subject matter. It presents a grimmer picture of the state of American sexual union than do its four predecessors, but at the same time it is their logical culmination.

The Sins of Philip Fleming (1959) describes the protagonist's impotency with a woman he desires to make his mistress. The Chapman Report (1960) observes the impact of a sex research team upon the lives of several suburbanites whom they interview. The Three Sirens (1963) contrasts the natural promiscuity of South Sea Islanders with the unhealthy puritanism of American anthropologists who study the tribe.

The Seven Minutes (1969) depicts the obscenity trial of a writer whose erotic novel allegedly caused a rape. The Celestial Bed (1989) recounts a controversy over sexual surrogates in a small California town. These novels depict modern Americans, male and female alike, caught in a sexual contradiction: naturally spurred to a variety of partners but socially trained to be guilty about sex without love. A few lucky characters seize a moment of pure passion before settling into a monogamous relationship of sex-with-love.

The Fan Club is grimmer than the other sexual melodramas because no character finds both passion and love.

It brings together all the sexual frustrations and dysfunctions studied in the earlier novels. The Fan Club seems to rebut the other books by showing that no resolution exists to the contradiction between individual sexual desires and the social injunction to legitimize them in marriage.



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