

Fanso and Granny-Flo Short Guide

Fanso and Granny-Flo by James Berry

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

Fanso and Granny-Flo Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

"Fanso and Granny-Flo" depicts the life of an impoverished youngster in Jamaica. Fanso lives with his grandmother and helps her with household chores and efforts to make money, especially with the production of coconut oil that Granny Flo call sell.

Fanso, since his birth, has lived with his grandmother while his mother has worked away from home as a cleaning woman; she can only visit her son and mother occasionally. Now thirteen years old, Fanso is beginning to have serious questions about his life and why it is the way it is. He is particularly curious about his father, a mystery man whom Granny Flo does not wish to discuss. When Fanso's father appears at Fanso and Granny Flo's home, Fanso's life collapses around him.

About the Author

James Berry was born in 1925 in Jamaica, grew up there, and has used it as the setting for most of his fiction.

When twenty-three years old, he moved to England where he became an educator and literary scholar, publishing *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of West Indian Poets in Britain* in 1976 (revised 1981).

In addition to his scholarship and writing fiction, Berry has published two collections of poetry, *Fractured Circles* (1979) and *When I Dance: Poems* (1988). Featuring a deft prose style and fine depictions of life in Jamaica, *A Thief in the Village* was declared a Coretta Scott King Award honor book.

Although he did not begin writing fiction for young readers until late in his life, Berry has in less than a decade established himself as a distinguished voice in the field of young adult literature.

Setting

Berry sets this story in the Jamaica he grew up in, with the background and characters drawn from his life there. Fanso's world is limited to his home with Granny Flo and school. The story shows him going about his tiresome chores, mostly helping crush the pulp of coconuts for boiling to release coconut oil. The house itself is small, without amenities. Fanso's clothing is old; he yearns for the hard-to-afford luxury of a pair of long pants. A short walk away is a bus stop where one can take the bus to and from nearby towns and Kingston, where Fanso's father lives. It is at the bus stop that Fanso's life seems to begin and end. There is where his father arrives and departs; it is there that Fanso hopes to be carried away to Kingston and his father; it is there that his mother arrives, bringing reality back to Fanso's brief fantasy of visiting his father and meeting brothers and sisters he has never seen.



Social Sensitivity

"Fanso and Granny-Flo" examines the emotional life of a young adult who is beginning to have serious concerns about his limited prospects in life due to his poverty. He wishes he could have a proper education, perhaps someday attending college. The reality of his having to eke out a living working with his grandmother, supplemented with the money his mother earns, suggests that college may be far too expensive for him ever to attend, even though he gets good grades in the local school.

Many young readers will not be surprised by Fanso's having to work very hard just to survive; they may, now or in the future, work in a family business themselves. Those who have never worked in -tough menial jobs may be appalled at how Fanso must spend his time when not at school, making "Fanso and Granny- Flo" a revelation for them about how deprived many young people throughout the world are. Most readers are likely to know something about absent parents; if not missing a parent themselves, they probably know young people who are without one or both parents.

Fanso's father disappeared to Kingston before Fanso was born. He promised to look for a job to help support his wife and child, but for thirteen years nothing has been heard from him. Fanso's mother lives away from her child; she works as a cleaning woman and uses her wages to help support Fanso and Granny Flo. These details not only offer a view of Jamaican life, but create the emotional background for Fanso's actions. He is very confused about himself, about who he is and why he lives as he does, and he wants to know more about himself. An entirely reasonable place to start learning about oneself is to learn about one's parents, and thus Fanso, much to Granny Flo's distress, wants to know about his father. "Fanso and Granny Flo" offers sensitive insights into how a young man relates with mostly absent parents when he does see them and how he deals with the other emotional consequences of being from a broken home. This story has an appeal far beyond Jamaica; it has meaning for all young people who desire to know themselves, especially for those who need or want insight into family relationships.



Literary Qualities

Berry's stories, like Shakespeare's plays, tend to dramatize universal ideas by focusing on richly detailed scenes whose meanings are fleshed out through the relations of realistic characters. In the case of "Fanso and Granny-Flo," Fanso is like Hamlet, having lost a father and not knowing why. Hamlet is quite reasonably confused by his situation, as is Fanso equally confused about his. On the other hand, Fanso does not have the prince's luxury of being able to contemplate his life; Fanso must work all the time and take advantage of brief moments for thinking when they happen to come along. In "Fanso and Granny-Flo," one such moment comes while he does the relentlessly repetitive work of milling coconut pulp.

As is usually the case in Berry's writings for young adults, his carefully phrased narration creates the illusion of simplicity for a story that is in fact complex, both in its characterization and its structure. For instance, note the story's opening: Fanso's comings and goings and concerns were so well woven in with his granny's, it was hard to tell he had a big secret worry.

All the villagers had a big open worry—the drought that was on.

For days it seemed it would rain, but the rain did not come.

The lands were cracked open and brittle. Food-crop leaves went into a deeper brown color.

Drought sucked the whole island dry.

This passage shares one literary quality with the prose of Henry James; it shows a succinct infusion of the story's key themes into symbolic images which adds power and subtlety to the emotional impact of the narrative. Note how Fanso and Granny Flo's relationship is sharply summarized in one unadorned sentence, and then note how Fanso's worry is linked to the community's worry about the drought. This approach to style and meaning creates a compressed, almost shorthand manner of communication which allows Berry to say much about Fanso's thinking with few words distilled in a short space: Throughout the story he can develop the images of the drought and through them represent Fanso's internal life. And what is that life like? It is parched and yearning for rain; it is cracked open and brittle.

Fanso's emotional drought threatens to turn his heart and self into a desiccated plain.

When his father Bougsie visits Fanso's home, the rain arrives with him.

Fanso is amazed and delighted; just as the community must welcome the desperately needed rain. Bougsie is the water Fanso apparently needs for his emotional growth, and he does seem to blossom, determining to take command of his life. When Bougsie leaves, so does the rain, and the community wonders whether there will be more, just



as Fanso wonders whether he will see his father again. The rain is full of hope for the land, and Bougsie's visit brings Fanso the hope that he will cease feeling deprived, that his father can fill some of the emptiness he feels.

The simultaneous departure of the rain and Bougsie leaves confusion and longing behind.



Themes and Characters

Berry provides four sharply drawn characters in "Fanso and Granny-Flo": Fanso, Granny-Flo, Bougsie, and Miss Sita. The protagonist is Fanso, who at thirteen is beginning to have adult thoughts about himself and his way of life. Berry uses action and symbolism to flesh out Fanso's personality. His actions show him to be impulsive, as when he tries to run away, thoughtful, as when he asks about his father, and obedient, as when he returns home with his mother in spite of wishing to run away to Kingston. One also learns from Fanso's actions that he is trapped: Every move he makes is limited by his poverty. He cannot, for instance, actually take the bus to Kingston; instead, he is likely to be put off the bus miles from home because he cannot pay the bus fare. The symbolism begins at the start of the short story and continues to its end: Fanso is like the dry country; he is experiencing an emotional drought just as the land is. He yearns for rain—his father—gets a little and thirsts for more. He and the country around him share the same dry and trapped identity. The result is a powerful depiction of a youngster's emotional life.

Granny-Flo's character is depicted mostly through her reactions to Fanso; she is not as vividly present as he is.

Her cracking coconuts and removing their pulp shows her to be strong and well-versed in the skills needed to survive in Jamaica. Her life seems to be nothing but the labor of either caring for Fanso or busy working on many projects to earn money. That she cares deeply for Fanso is revealed in her distress when he seems disrespectful to her and implies that his life might be better with his father than living with her. Like Fanso, she is given to strong emotion, and she is tough—she refuses the money Bougsie offers her rather than risk demeaning herself by taking money from a man she despises.

Bougsie, like the rain, is enigmatic.

For thirteen years he has been no more than a nagging distant worry in Fanso's life, then he stops by while taking the bus to somewhere else, probably Kingston. Handsome and well dressed, he seems prosperous, but he brings with himself only money, not the spiritual sustenance Fanso requires.

In contrast to Bougsie is Miss Sita.

Her conduct gives truth to GrannyFlo's attitude toward Fanso's questions about his father. He left for Kingston, promising to send money home, and then he started a new family there and ignored his old one. On the other hand, Miss Sita goes away to earn money and actually does as she promises, using her earnings to care for Fanso and Granny-Flo. When she arrives on the bus, she is surprised by seeing Fanso already there, even though she had not sent word ahead that she was coming to visit for a couple days. Whereas Bougsie was confused and indecisive when he visited Fanso and Granny-Flo, Miss Sita is decisive, taking charge of her son and the situation. She also shows that as a caring parent she knows more of what Fanso really wants than does his



father; she brings him a fine pair of long pants. Perhaps this means that Fanso will find the rain—emotional sustenance—he needs in his immediate family—Granny-Flo and Miss Sita— rather than in imagining a father whose face he cannot even remember after just seeing him.



Topics for Discussion

1. Will Bougsie return to visit Fanso?
2. What is the significance of Fanso not being able to picture his father's face?
3. Is Granny-Flo justified in being angry with Fanso when Fanso asks about his father? Why would she be angry and unhappy?
4. The long pants seem symbolic, representing Fanso's transition into adulthood. Has Fanso matured in any way? Has he matured enough to be considered more of a grownup than a child?
5. Is the account of Fanso's emotional life realistic?
6. Since there is no action adventure in "Fanso and Granny-Flo" where does the story's interest lie?
7. Is Bougsie a bad man? 8. Is Fanso cruel to want to see his father against Granny-Flo's wishes?
9. When Fanso becomes a father will he be like Bougsie?
10. Why is Fanso's worry like the people's worry about the drought?
11. Should Fanso be punished for trying to run away?
12. Why does Granny-Flo make the sign of the cross the way she does?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How is coconut oil made? What is it used for?

2. What is school like in Jamaica?

Are there half-day Fridays? What hope does someone like Fanso have of going to college?

3. Do Jamaican parents often have to live away from home in order to earn money to care for their children?

4. Are absentee parents a notable problem in Jamaica?

5. What is the weather like in Jamaica? Does it often have droughts?

6. What is the language the characters speak? What are its origins? Does Berry do a good job of recreating the language in his characters' speech?

7. What does "Fanso and GrannyFlo" tell you about everyday life in Jamaica?

8. Why would long pants mean a great deal to Fanso?

9. What do Fanso, Granny-Flo, and Miss Sita do to survive?

10. What would happen to Fanso if Granny-Flo died? What would happen to him if his mother disappeared the way his father has?

For Further Reference

"Berry, James." In *Contemporary Authors*. Edited by Susan M. Trosky.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992, pp. 3638. This provides little biographical information and consists mostly of highlights from Berry's books.

Bissoondath, Neil. *New York Times Book Review* (May 8, 1988): 30. Bissoondath finds the details of the stories in *A Thief in the Village* to be accurate.

Gillies, Eva. *Times Literary Supplement* (July 8, 1988): 765. Gillies admires the depiction of Jamaican life in *A Thief in the Village*.

Related Titles

Ajeemah and His Son (1992; see separate entry, Vol. 9) is about slavery in Jamaica in the 1800s. Like "Fanso and Granny-Flo." it features powerful and dignified language, a keen sense of descriptive detail, and very realistic evocations of ordinary Jamaican life.

In this novella, Berry displays the same sharp insight into the emotional lives of his characters that he shows in "Fanso and Granny-Flo." Spiderman Anancy (1988) is a retelling of Jamaican folktales; again, the diction is dignified, and universals of life are pointed out in tales intended to instruct young people about life.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, 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 Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996