Fear of Flying Short Guide

Fear of Flying by Erica Jong

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Characters

The first-person narrator, although typical of the contemporary intellectual milieu, also successfully represents everywoman. Isadora White Wing was born "Weiss;" her parents were Jewish artists, entertainers and leftists of the 1930s who had, in the 1940s, Anglicized the name, gone into business, and started celebrating the winter solstice (with a tree in the house on December 25) and the vernal equinox (with decorated eggs and baskets).

Isadora marries a fellow graduate student of astounding intelligence (who became violently insane) and then an emotionless — but safe — Chinese psychiatrist, Bennett Wing. Details like these — specific, exaggerated enough to be funny, and yet also capable of generalization — allow Isadora to be seen as a sister by women of many backgrounds. In her own family, Randy, mother of nine children, who is married to an Arab and kept virtually in purdah, nicely represents society's ideal vision of maternity. Automatic liberalism is encapsulated by the marriage of her younger sister Lalah to a light-brown graduate of Harvard medical school. He spends four days a week practicing orthopedic surgery and the other three jumping horses at an exclusive suburban club.

Isadora also elicits identification through her vitality, sexual frankness, and the robust humor she uses as a weapon. The undercurrent of seriousness, however, is never far away. In one brief meditation Isadora muses that marriage has more cons than pros — except for the overwhelming fact that almost anything is better than being single in a man's world, which entails supporting oneself at a lowpaying job, coming home to an empty flat, and constantly fending off advances from unattractive male predators. The widely shared nature of Isadora's complaints helps reveal the other characters as emblems, rather than caricatures. In mid-book she leaves her husband for a brief fling across Europe with a British psychologist named Adrian Goodlove. He is not the solution to all of her problems.

Social Concerns

The year of Fear of Flying's publication, 1973, can now be seen as the high point of the modern feminist movement's first phase — a phase marked by consciousness raising, rebellion, and anger. Erica Jong gave voice to feelings and attitudes that women had previously been reluctant to express even in the privacy of their own minds. Among the "forbidden" topics were erotic fantasies, masturbation, menstruation, and the cultural demand that women shape, shave, scent and otherwise despise their natural bodies.

Many reviewers at the time referred to the book's attitude toward men by the simple phrase "man-hating." However, it was far too complex for that simple term. The novel contains elements of ridicule, contempt, anger, pity, and anguish that can perhaps best be summed up as irreverence: Once old assumptions are discarded it does often appear that the emperor has no clothes.

The book thus shared in the general questioning of ideals and institutions that was part of the political turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Techniques

Fear of Flying is structured more tightly than is at first apparent. It begins with Isadora's trip to Vienna with her husband for a psychoanalytic congress. Because Vienna is the city of Freud and also, in welcoming large numbers of Jewish psychoanalysts, is trying to pretend that the Nazi past never happened, it provides an appropriate focus for Isadora's examination of personal neuroses, family history, Jewish identity, and Freud's question: "What do women want?"

She explores these issues through a series of flashbacks that move in thematic rather than chronological order.

Because the flashback scenes are developed in full and often parodic detail the novel is sometimes described as picaresque: a satiric, realistic series of adventures, linked only by a central adventurer. Nevertheless, the quest motif controls Isadora's path, and the novel is further enriched by well-developed allusion, imagery, and symbolism.

Themes

Like many quasi-autobiographical first novels, Fear of Flying is a bildungsroman whose central theme is the search for self-discovery. Isadora Wing re-examines and reinterprets her personal history in an effort to define herself as a daughter, a woman, a Jew and a writer. Structurally and philosophically the process resembles psychoanalysis — but traditional psychiatry is also a focus of the book's iconoclasm. The psychoanalysts Isadora knows operate on the basis of theoretical abstractions that have little connection to life as she sees it. Isadora examines her history in order to discover meanings that grow from her own intelligence and her experience as a woman in a particular society.

The title works on several levels.

Isadora is literally afraid of flying — afraid of losing control, of trusting her life to others, of technology as an intellectual construct she cannot understand and thus must take on faith. But the fear of flying is also a fear of risk, of telling the truth, of venturing into paths that are not clearly marked. Oppression can provide both security and freedom; so long as one blames others (parents, husbands, lovers, the social system) one can be comforted by anger and by lacking the power to change.

One major conflict, as Isadora searches for independence, is her fear of loneliness and her recognition that a strong sexual appetite is an essential part of her being. "The big problem," Isadora comments at one point, "was how to make your feminism jibe with your unappeasable hunger for male bodies."

Her inability to discover any permanent solution to this conflict is one of the book's thematic strengths.

Literary Precedents

Jong specialized in eighteenth-century literature when she was working towards a doctoral degree at Columbia University, and the most obvious precedent for the book's structure and tone — including the bawdy humor that simultaneously exposes and defends against serious and unpleasant realities — is to be found in such books as Henry Fielding's Tom Jones. Among more recent novels, critics often called Fear of Flying a female version of Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint (1969) or compared it to J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951).

A number of novels with similar themes were published at almost the same time as Fear of Flying, including Sue Kaufman's, The Diary of a Mad Housewife (1967), Dorothy Bryant's, Ella Price's Journal (1972), Anne Roiphe's, Up the Sandbox (1972), and Marge Piercy's Small Changes (1973). All dealt, at least in part, with the search for selfdiscovery by a woman already married and supposedly "happy." Among these books, Jong's was most successful in using humor as a weapon, although it did not express the warmth or resolution typical of some other feminist visions.

Related Titles

Jong traced the further fortunes of Isadora Wing in How to Save Your Own Life (1977) and Parachutes and Kisses (1984). Neither book was as successful as the first, in part because — retaining the quasi-autobiographical premise — Isadora Wing is presented as the author of a wildly popular erotic novel.

One theme becomes the effect of public success on private life. The books are less funny, less bawdy, less exaggerated, and less universal. When, in How to Save Your Own Life, Isadora Wing enters million-dollar negotiations with Hollywood agents or, in Parachutes and Kisses, faces single motherhood in a fourteen-room house with a Mercedes and a nanny, the books provide the attractions of roman a clef; they are read for biographical gossip about Erica Jong and no longer serve as vehicles for everywoman's fantasies and anger.

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