

# The Female Man Short Guide

## The Female Man by Joanna Russ

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## Characters/Techniques

At the end of *The Female Man* the reader is likely to realize that there is really only one "character" in the novel — the speculative imagination of the author who has subdivided herself into four women, each an aspect of (perhaps) her own personality, each responding in different possible ways to situations encountered or imagined by the author. It is rather a highly elaborated version of the after-the-fact musings of a person who wonders "what if I had — ?" Such a format is more or less typical of parallel universe narratives. As Alice-Jael explains in some detail, all four of the "characters" are the same person: "we started the same . . . We ought to think alike and feel alike and act alike, but of course we don't. So plastic is humankind . . .

Between our dress, and our opinions, and our habits, and our beliefs, and our values, and our mannerisms, and our manners, and our expressions, and our ages, and our experience, even I can hardly believe that I am looking at three other myselfes." By shifting from one character's perspective to another's, juxtaposing the attitudes and reaction of each of the four women to the others' behavior, Russ emphasizes both the sameness and the important differences among them. These differences include differing attitudes about the use of violence, varieties of sexuality, and conflicting views of the relative usefulness or uselessness of men.

Two highly erotic scenes emphasize these differences. Janet Evason, splitting from the ambivalent voice of the narrator, succumbs to the seduction of Laura Rose and, in the succeeding narrative, destroys all the clichés about lesbian love. Later, Alice-Jael takes the "J's," as she calls them, to her Vermont mountain retreat where she keeps Davy, "the most beautiful man in the world," a blue-eyed blond house-pet and sexual toy who is controlled by the house computer by means of implants in his brain. While some might argue that these two scenes suggest that mature sexuality is possible only between women, and that men's sexual functions are nonessential or recreational in a potential world, these are only two possibilities explored among many potential "universes."

The sexually explicit nature of many passages in *The Female Man* is another evidence of Russ's position in relation to what has been called the "new wave" in science fiction. The writers of Russ's generation began to explore not only the uses of sexuality in conventional terms, but the many varieties available once the physical and psychological limits of conventional human behavior are dismissed.

## Social Concerns/Themes

The many modes of domination of women by men and the potential for the termination of that dominance in a new sociopolitical order are the primary themes of *The Female Man*.

Each of the four main characters embodies a different response to male oppression, depending in part on her social context. Russ creates several parallel universes in which the roles of men and women differ. In *Whileaway*, men have no roles, all of them having died centuries ago in a plague; women have evolved a society in which they fulfill all necessary roles (please see the separate entry on "When It Changed"). The very different world of Alice-Jael is in a constant state of war — the Men against the Women — and Alice-Jael is just as cunning and ruthless as the Biblical heroine after whom she is named, although her weapons are technologically more sophisticated than a tent stake. Jeannine is a passive victim of a society somewhat like today's would be if it had stopped developing in the 1930s or 1940s. Joanna is a woman in the early stages of feminist consciousness, not yet ready to break completely with the patriarchal system.

Behind them all is the shadowy figure — the author — who is all of them and more. Their responses to each other, and to the different social and political contexts in which they live, provide the satiric and analytical moments in this complex novel. One crucial underlying concept — most fully developed in the person of Janet and in the society of *Whileaway* — is that "gender" is not biologically or psychologically determined, but rather is an ideological product of the dominant forces of society.



# Key Questions

Reading this novel is like playing three-dimensional chess or putting together a mosaic. Each piece that is revealed has some relationship to the others but the reader does not understand it until all the pieces are out of the box. Russ uses the parallel-universe structure and the different female narrators/characters to graphically reveal the complexity of human personality.

The reader is forced to take all the separate tiles with their different textures and colors, examine them, look for a pattern and then put them together to create a single mosaic.

1. This has been called a "feminist novel. Do you feel that this is true?

What evidence can you give to support your belief?

2. What specific societal norms does Russ examine in *The Female Man*?

3. Do you like Russ's techniques of using a woman's journal to reveal the plot? What other techniques might she have employed?

4. What does this book tell us about the nature of men and women?

5. Read "When It Changed" (1974) also by Russ and compare the all-female world of *Whileaway* to the worlds of *The Female Man*.

6. Russ feels that this work reveals the "insanity of a male chauvinist society." Compare it with Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance*, which depicts a world where all the males disappear from all the females. Which society is better equipped to survive? What happens to society when all the roles must be assumed by one gender?

7. How do Russ's characters demonstrate the fact that we all have other parts and dimensions to our personalities? What do each one of the female characters represent? What personality traits do they have in common?

8. The language of each of the females reveals a great deal about them and their personalities. Find an example that you feel best represents each of the females. Why did you choose that specific example?

9. How does Russ depict the men in the lives of each of these females?

10. Are there positive aspects of the societies depicted in this novel? Describe these different societies? Why do you think Russ chose these specific "realities" and not some others?

## Literary Precedents/Related Titles

While the parallel-universe narrative is familiar to science fiction readers, there is little else about *The Female Man* that can be called conventional. Not only do the unusual personalities of the several characters force the reader into unfamiliar modes of thought, but the frequent shifts of point of view and the sudden appearance of satirical lists or hypothetical dialogues between nameless character types tend to keep the reader off balance. Russ might not appreciate comparisons with earlier male satirists, but the portrayal of the Manlanders, for example, has both a Rabelaisian grotesquerie and a Swiftian bite. The games (such as "The Great Happiness Contest" or "Ain't It Awful") are like scenes from Restoration Comedy, as the names of the participants — Saccharissa, Wailissa, Lamentissa — suggest. Russ uses a remarkable range of comic and satiric techniques to break down conventional expectations and attitudes and to expose the absurdity of the false consciousness generated by patriarchal society.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994