Fish Study Guide

Fish by Jill McCorkle

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

□Fish□ is a short story by American writer Jill McCorkle. It was published in her third short story collection, *Creatures of Habit* (2001). □Fish□ is the final piece of the collection, in which all the stories are set in McCorkle's fictional small town of Fulton, North Carolina. Fulton is the setting for many of McCorkle's stories and novels, drawn from her own experiences of growing up in the South. McCorkle is an award-winning contemporary writer known for her ability to evoke Southern life with humor and beauty. Critics agree that her talent as a writer is only improving as she continues to write.

□Fish□ is a fictional memoir about the end of a man's life, as narrated by the younger of his two daughters. Surrounded by the family, the daughter ponders stories about her father's childhood, his parents, and her own childhood memories. Despite the sad subject of a parent's dying, McCorkle's short story is uplifting in its conclusion. The title of the story is symbolic, an allusion to the symbol for Jesus Christ. This short story does not show a family torn apart by grief but instead united by love. Through her remembrances, the narrator is able to keep her father close to her heart even as he dies.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1958

Jill McCorkle was born July 7, 1958, in Lumberton, North Carolina, to John Wesley Jr. and Melba Ann (Collins) McCorkle. She studied creative writing with Max Steele and Lee Smith at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1980, the year she graduated, McCorkle won the Jesse Rehder Prize, the university's prestigious writing award. The following year she received a master's degree in writing from Hollins College.

McCorkle submitted her first novel, *The Cheer Leader*, to Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, a new publisher founded by one of her former professors. Energized by her first sale, she quickly wrote and submitted her second novel, *July 7th*. The first book had not yet been released, so Algonquin decided to release the novels simultaneously in 1984, a daring move that garnered McCorkle a lot of critical attention for a first-time novelist. McCorkle's career never slowed down after that. In addition to prizes won while in college, McCorkle earned the New England Booksellers' Association Award in 1993 for her body of work; was named one of *Granta* magazine's Best Young American Novelists in 1996; won the North Carolina Prize for Literature and the Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, both in 1999. Five of her eight books have been Notable Books of the Year recommended by the *New York Times Book Review*. McCorkle's *Creatures of Habit* (2001) is a short story collection which includes □Fish.□

As of the early 2000s, McCorkle filled in the time between novels by writing reviews and short stories. Her reviews have appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *New York Woman*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. Her short stories have been published by high profile journals such as *Cosmopolitan* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

McCorkle has taught writing at the University of North Carolina, Tufts University, Duke University, Harvard University, Bennington College, and Brandeis University. As of 2006, McCorkle lived outside Boston with her husband and two children.

Plot Summary

□Fish□ begins with news that a man, sixty-four years old, has just found out that he is dying. The cause□whether cancer or something else□is never given. Family and friends gather to comfort the man, including a woman who nursed him back from pneumonia when he was two years old. She saved him then but cannot save him now. His younger daughter narrates this story, and she recalls her father's childhood despair that he might die as did his stillborn brother. He has two older brothers and two older sisters, but his □partner□ died. This sense of loss initiated a depression that haunted him for much of his life.

The narrator's eleven-year-old nephew sits with his dying grandfather and tells him all the stories the grandfather made up for him when he was very young. All of his grandchildren are there, and their affection for him is plain to see. The youngest grandchild is the narrator's baby son. Her father asks her to hold him up high so he can see the baby: □I want to see his whole body,□ her father says.

The narrator recalls her father's fear of water and how, nonetheless, he would wade into the pool up to his chest (the edge within reach) to watch his younger daughter dive and to cheer for her. They also went fishing together, standing in water up to their hips, and he would warn her about all the dangers of ocean fishing. Once she caught a toadfish which swallowed her hook, and her father cut the line to free it. □But just think of the fishtales he'll have for his children and grandchildren. He will always be the one that got away.□ He made light of it, but his daughter saw sadness in him.

Back in the present, the narrator, along with her mother and sister, Jeannie, sing her father's favorite songs for him. They are well-known love songs from the 1930s.

The narrator remembers that, before she left for college, her father gave her advice on how to be safe, and he assured her that she's never too old to come home. True to his word, when she calls him years later and asks him to come get her because she is leaving her marriage, he overcomes his fear of flying to go to her, pack up her things, and drive her home. Now, at forty years of age, the narrator is the prepared one, ready for any possibility, taking safety precautions as if second nature. It will be her turn now to pass her father's advice on to her children.

She recounts a memory of her childhood, a time she thinks her father does not remember. Their family used to take vacations to Ocean Drive in South Carolina where they rented the bottom floor of a beachside cottage and had an obnoxious upstairs neighbor who greased his body and whistled □Red Red Robin□ constantly. She and her sister, Jeannie, five and nine years old respectively, buried a note on that beach in 1963 for their future selves to return to and dig up. They remembered that day, a day that was not more outstanding than any other except that it was summer vacation and their dreams were of mansions and Cadillacs and fluffy pets. Her most vivid memory of that summer is of having to clean up Play-Doh that she pressed into the rug of the rental

cottage. It was difficult to pick out all the pieces, and she knew as she was sitting there cleaning it that she would remember this experience.

Casting farther into the past, the narrator remembers her paternal grandfather. Despite hardships while growing up, such as his father's alcoholism and their repossessed belongings, her father only said nice things about his father to his children, and they grew up loving him unconditionally. As a schoolboy, the narrator's father used to play hooky to go downtown and shoot pool in a dark hall. "Your eyes were always drawn to the light." The narrator describes in frank terms her father's struggle with depression:

How frightened you must have been the first time you could not find any light at all. The times your heart was so heavy you could not rise up from the bed. . . . And there were many people willing to let you believe that . . . your overwhelming sense of loss and sadness made you less of a man.

The narrator was astonished and dismayed to learn how little understanding people had of depression and how they disrespected her father, a result of their ignorance. She and Jeannie stayed by their father's side when he was laid up in his bedroom with depression one summer in their childhood. They were afraid to leave him, afraid for him to leave them. When he was later hospitalized, his girls were too young to be allowed inside the hospital, so he came out to hug his daughters and apologize for being there. They rode home looking at a card their father gave them "about love and joy and the birth of spring." The card, the narrator recalls, "made us sad. The only resurrection I cared about was yours."

Life was renewed for their little family when their father came home from the hospital once and for all. "You were young and had many years ahead of you." Her father said the same thing to her when she left her marriage. Less than a year later, her grandfather had a stroke and was afflicted with throat cancer. The narrator went to the hospital to see her grandfather but had to wait outside. She asked her father to read her "The Little Match Girl," her favorite story at that time because it made her cry, and she liked to cry.

It had become a kind of hobby, this need to imagine myself or someone I loved taken away. I had to prepare myself. Even now, I feel that's what I'm doing"every word, every image is a match struck in an attempt to hold on.

As her father dies, both the narrator and her sister are aware of death's imminence, as if from a sixth sense. They gather their mother and their uncle and watch this beloved man quietly pass away with one last blink of his eyes.

The narrator has two dreams about her father after he dies. First, she dreams that she has put his limp body on a swing, tying his arms to the chains to hold him in place. She is a kid, and he is wearing a robe and slippers. People pass by and tell her that she is sick and should not be holding onto the dead. She insists repeatedly that he is not dead. Eventually, they all go away, and when she and her father are alone, he lifts his head and winks at her, saying "*You're right . . . I am not dead*."

The narrator's final recollection is of her grandfather and his collie, Bruno, and how they walked to the corner store every afternoon. □This is how I remember your father. Small and neat with a hat he politely tipped at everyone he passed.□ He held her hand while crossing the street. He had the same blue-grey eyes as his son. In the second dream, the narrator sees her father in a mirror. He cannot speak to her because he is using all of his energy just to be visible. Her mother and sister join her in the room. The three of them are reflected in the mirror along with her father's image, briefly making them a whole family once more. He tells her in her dream, as he did before he died: □You are my heart; that's all that there is.□

Characters

Father

The narrator's father finds out he is dying at the relatively young age of sixty-four. This story of his last days is narrated by the younger of his two daughters. He is the son of a butcher whose family fell on hard times, possibly because of his father's alcoholism. He is the youngest of five, having two sisters and two brothers. As a child, he felt that his partner was missing because of a stillborn baby boy born the year before he was. He also worried that he would die because he was somehow linked to the dead baby.

Despite a sad beginning to his life, he overcame pneumonia at the age of two and continued to be courageous into adulthood: saving his cat, taking care of his father, venturing into water and onto an airplane for his daughter, and finally, facing death without flinching. He never let his phobias get the best of him although these fears were not permanently overcome.

The narrator's father was not perfect, though. He suffered from depression and was eventually hospitalized for this condition, and his long absences were painful to his family. But when he finally came home and was feeling better, the narrator remembers, □it felt like life was starting again.□ The end of his life is filled with family, love,and memory. The remembrances of his daughter keep his spirit alive even as his body dies. Readers see his spirit in the almost otherworldly dreams the narrator has after her father dies. His voiceless communication with her implies that she and he understand something that no one else does.

Grandfather

The narrator's paternal grandfather was a butcher by trade. He had a drinking problem that may or may not have been the cause of his family's financial hardship. The narrator hints at an uneasy relationship between father and son and even recalls a story about her father carrying home her drunken grandfather when he made a public scene at a high school football game.

The narrator's memories of her grandfather are gentle and loving despite the man's troubled life. She recalls with fondness how he held her hand when crossing the street; how he smelled of bourbon and cigarette ash; how he tipped his hat to people as he passed them on the street; how he walked to the corner store every day with his old collie, Bruno. He did not know how to talk to his son about his son's depression, but he came to see him nonetheless because there was love between them.

The grandfather died not long after his son came home from the hospital after being treated for depression. He suffered a paralyzing stroke but died from throat cancer, his voice cut off.

Jeannie

Jeannie is the narrator's older sister. She has an eleven-year-old son and possibly other children. She is present with the rest of the family while their father is dying. One of the narrator's memories of her sister is of a summer vacation at the beach in South Carolina. Jeannie was nine years old, and the narrator was five. Jeannie wrote a note about who they were and their vacation, and the two girls swore that when they were older they would come back and dig it up. Jeannie's dream for their future is of Cadillac convertibles, mansions, and handsome husbands. Now an adult, she attends her father in his last days along with her sister and mother, wrapped in love and a reality that does not include mansions and convertibles.

Jeannie's Son

Jeannie's son is eleven years old, the eldest of the grandchildren. He and his grandfather share a special bond through the stories his grandfather made up for him when he was a small boy. Now, while his grandfather is on his deathbed, Jeannie's son quietly tells these stories back him as if he can keep his beloved relative alive by keeping his stories, his words, alive.

Mother

The narrator's mother figures very little in the story. Her husband is dying, and she is present, helping her daughters care for him in his last days. With her daughters, she sings her husband's favorite songs to him, hoping to make a connection, to communicate her love when he is beyond physical communication.

Narrator

The narrator is the second daughter of a man who suddenly learns he is dying at the relatively young age of sixty-four. She has a baby boy, whom her father asks to see while on his deathbed. She was once married, but it did not work out, and her father helped her leave her husband by flying out to where she was (despite his fear of flying), packing up a rental car with her belongings, and driving straight home. She also remembers, from when she was five years old, the beach cottage that her family rented in South Carolina, although those memories are somewhat disjointed and formed of vibrant sensations: the red Play-Doh smashed into the rug; the neighbor singing □Red Red Robin□ continuously; the time-capsule note. Her father used to take her swimming, although he stayed by the edge because of his fear of water. One particularly poignant memory concerns a time when they were fly-fishing, and her father helped cut loose a fish that had swallowed the hook. She could see his veiled melancholy, an echo of the fish's fate.

As the narrator, her sister, and her mother help to ease his dying, the narrator gathers these memories together as a way to keep her father close even after he is gone. She loves her father deeply.

Very Old Woman

The very old woman comes to visit the dying father. She once nursed him back to health from pneumonia when he was two years old. Now she can do nothing for him except give him comfort.

Themes

Resurrection

Resurrection means to rise from the dead or to revive. Resurrection is the narrator's primary theme in □Fish.□ Many of the narrator's memories over the course of the story are concerned with little moments in which resurrection has occurred or nearly occurred, for example, the father's birth a year after his stillborn brother; his childhood recovery from pneumonia; his depression and subsequent recovery as an adult; and the daughter leaving her marriage and starting her life anew. The imminence of death comes as a surprise to the father at the beginning of □Fish,□ but he accepts it gracefully, sad only that he will miss watching his grandchildren grow. The memories the narrator recalls are a foil against death and its finality and serve to imbue a dying man with life, reviving him momentarily to the fullness of being.

At the end of the short story, the family is not mourning the father's death so much as seeing him in a new realm of existence. The narrator dreams that she is the only one who knows her father is really still alive. Then, in another dream he joins her, her sister, and her mother in a mirrored image that temporarily brings them together again. The idea that a loved one is in a different place rather than just dead and inanimate can be comforting to those left behind. The sense of transformation after death□resurrection to a new realm of being□gives the ending of the story an uplifted note. Death becomes a beginning of something new rather than an end of the mortal life.

The title □Fish□ and the theme of resurrection also resonate with the Christian religion. In the early days of the Roman Empire, practicing Christians were persecuted, and these people may have kept their identities and meetings secret by using the ichthys symbol. The word, ichthys, is Greek for □fish□ and may have been appropriated as a Christian symbol for a number of reasons; one is the story in which Jesus feeds five thousand people with only a small amount of fish and bread. Another idea is that letters of the Greek word for fish serve as an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

As given in her dream, the daughter believes in her father's ongoing life despite the denial of others around her, which could be understood as a reference to Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was a disciple of Jesus who witnessed his crucifixion. She later discovered the sepulcher of Jesus was empty and saw a vision of angels that reassured her of his resurrection and ascension to heaven.

Familial Love

Familial love is immediately present in □Fish□ with the narrator's grief over her father's impending death and the gathering of her family to be with him, to care for him, and to be with each other. But as the narrator reflects on her and her father's past, the same strong love that ties this small family (father, mother, and two daughters) together is a

thread that runs back through her father's life as well. Despite the financial hardships his parents faced, his father's alcoholism, and other unspoken tensions between father and son that the narrator alludes to, she affirms to her father, "you only said nice things and we grew up to love him." This family has stuck together and cared for each other even when it meant the narrator's father, as a young man, carrying his drunken father home from a high school football game after he caused a scene. Their love was not necessarily spoken, but it was unfailingly present.

The narrator remembers the absence of her father due to his severe depression. She did not blame him, only feared to lose him, to lose anyone. She clung to the story "The Little Match Girl," by Hans Christian Andersen, when she was young. That story is about a child who sells boxes of matches on the street to earn money for her and her father. One cold New Year's Eve night she lights match after precious match, using them up in order to keep warm. Eventually, she dies of the cold. The narrator acknowledges that her memories are like matches struck "in an attempt to hold on."

The final scenes after her father's death are not ones of grief and mourning but instead of dreams the narrator has in which her father is alive, her family brought back together. In one she sees her father in a mirror. Her mother and sister enter the room and the three of them look at the family of four standing together in the mirror image. In this dream, her father repeats what he told her on his deathbed: "You are my heart; that's all that there is." As he dies, she whispers to him, "I'll be looking for you." The ties of love in this family are not broken by death.

Style

Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one subject is described in terms of a dissimilar subject, in order to suggest an analogy. McCorkle uses metaphor directly at the beginning of the story when the narrator describes her father's □metaphor for life□: □You WERE TERRIFIED of the water, but you loved to step into it, chest deep, pool edge within reach.□ The narrator's father was a courageous man, who coped with his fears by assuring his safety. She recalls his coming in the water to cheer for her when she dove and swam around him.

The toadfish the narrator catches suggests her father's ability to continue on despite problems. The hook is lodged too deeply in the fish for her father to remove it, so he cuts the line and lets the □poor old guy□ swim away. The fish had a narrow escape and will live despite the hook in his body. As if drawing a comparison to himself, the father says, □But just think of the fishtales he'll have for his children and grandchildren. He will always be the one that got away.□ The father has lived through difficulties as a child, had depression through his adult life, and yet he has been able to go on, relating with his children and grandchildren.

Tone

Tone is the manner of expression used by the writer to convey mood, emotion, setting, or some other desired quality. The tone used by McCorkle's narrator is at first nostalgic as she reflects on her and her father's lives. She remembers events, even those from before she was born, but these are stories of her family that have been given to her. They are an oral history of sorts. The narrator's nostalgia is also accented by grief, as she watches her father die. The moment of dying can be fraught with desperation, a chance for one last opportunity, one last interaction, one last word. The dying man's wife and children beg him to blink. It is his one remaining mode of communication, the only thing on his body he can move. He obliges them, and with one final blink of his eyes, he is dead.

□Fish□ ends with a definite turn toward sadness in the tone as the narrator comes to terms with her father's death. In the end, in a dream, they are briefly reunited, and the father reassures the daughter, □You are my heart; that's all that there is.□ The story ends on an uplifted note as the daughter promises her father as he dies that she will be looking for him.

Direct Address and Tense

□Fish□ is written in first person point of view with the narrator addressing her dying father as □you.□ The use of direct address conveys intimacy and privacy, a

communication between the speaker and a specific person. The communication is not intended for everyone, just the one being addressed. Direct address, thus, draws the reader into what in meant for only one other person. To add immediacy to this sense of privacy, McCorkle writes the story in present tense. The narrator's memories are reported in the past tense, certain past events in the father's life are also reported in past event, but the time stretching out in the present are the hours of vigil at the dying man's bedside. The narrator says, "When you come home from the hospital this time, we know that it is the beginning of the end." Some present time later, she says, "On the afternoon you die, we keep asking for a sign, a blink, a twitch." The family wants some communication back from the father, some acknowledgement. They sing to him; they hope he hears them. In the end, at the moment before he dies, "when your eyes were still able to blink," she says, he speaks his final words, "You are my heart; that's all that there is." The deep connection between father and daughter is conveyed. The direct address and the present tense put the reader right there in the room when the father dies, right at the moment of dying.

Historical Context

U.S. Economy in Twentieth Century

□Fish□ covers much of the twentieth century in the United States. One memory is from the father's childhood in the early 1930s when the United States was in the midst of the Great Depression. The Great Depression lasted for over a decade (1929-1941), ending with U.S. involvement in World War II, which created jobs and opportunities. The postwar era was a time of economic growth as the United States soared ahead of European, war-torn countries in its productivity and exportation of goods. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the U.S. economy became stagnant and then recessed, but the 1990s saw considerable growth. The present-day setting of the story is the early 1990s, when the United States was on the cusp of significant economic expansion. This expansion was matched and stimulated by exponential growth of Internet and other information technology businesses. Silicon Valley (a nickname for the Santa Clara Valley and nearby areas in northern California where many silicon chip manufacturers are located) became famous nationwide as a place in which to live and work as these businesses thrived. During the 1990s, inflation was low (money was worth more), interest rates were low (it was cheaper to borrow money for large purchases), and consumer confidence was high (Americans were more readily spending their money). Unemployment rates fell below 5 percent, the lowest they had been for thirty years. During this time, the United States was the dominant world power, and the globalization of the U.S. economy began to increase. Democratic president Bill Clinton was elected to his first term in 1992, and by the time his second term ended in 2001, the U.S. government was running on a budget surplus for the first time in thirty years. President Clinton claimed that his 1993 tax increase was the reason for the budget surplus and the stimulated economy, but many Republicans disagreed.

Terrorism in the United States

While the narrator was young, her biggest worry was her father's depression. During the father's and daughter's lives, the United States went through several wars, but their family was not directly affected. Starting in the early 1990s, during the present-day setting of this story, terrorism unfortunately became a significant topic in the United States.

The World Trade Center□also known as the Twin Towers□in New York City was first bombed in 1993 by Islamic radicals who were opposed to the international role of the United States. There were several incidents of domestic terrorist attacks (those perpetrated by U.S. citizens) in the intervening years: the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski (1978-1995); the Oklahoma City bombing (April 19, 1995); and the Centennial Olympic Park bombing (July 27, 1996).

The largest terrorist attack carried out on U.S. soil happened on September 11, 2001. That morning, four large airplanes fueled for cross-country flights were hijacked by a total of nineteen Arabic terrorists affiliated with Al Qaeda, an Islamic fundamentalist group led by Osama bin Laden. Between 8:46 and 10:03 a.m., two of the airplanes were forced to crash into the World Trade Center towers, one crashed into the west wall of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and the last crash occurred in a field in Pennsylvania after the terrorists on that plane apparently failed to achieve their target (reputed to be the White House) and were perhaps overcome by the other passengers.

Critical Overview

McCorkle broke ranks as a newly published author when Algonquin Books, her North Carolina-based publisher, simultaneously released her first two novels, *July 7th* and *The Cheer Leader* in 1984. She has been a darling of critics, garnering five *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book of the Year citations as well as other prestigious awards. As of 2006, she had three short story collections and five novels in print, all published by Algonquin.

Creatures of Habit, the collection in which □Fish□ was published, was well received by critics. Joanne Wilkinson, reviewing for *Booklist*, considers McCorkle's collection to be darker than her other work, which is not a negative assessment, simply an observation. Her summation is that McCorkle □writes near-perfect dialogue and is able to create powerful emotional moods within the space of a few paragraphs.□ An unsigned review from *Publishers Weekly* is equally glowing, congratulating the author on not writing to formula despite her animal-centric framework. This reviewer also writes that McCorkle has a □poet's skill□ and is □at the top of her game.□ Jo Manning at *Library Journal* highly recommends McCorkle's collection, comparing her with classic Southern writers such as Eudora Welty and Truman Capote. Susan Millar Williams, writing for the *Woman's Review of Books*, is likewise laudatory although she also states that she could do without the animal centered titles.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Ullmann examines the function of memory in McCorkle's short story.

McCorkle's short story □Fish□ is something of a memoir, capturing for the reader particular events in the lives of the narrator and her dying father. While the narrator's theme is resurrection, her method is memory. The sequence of memories is not strictly chronological, and this story does not pretend to be the narrator's autobiography. Autobiographies tend to be more committed to spanning the history of a person's entire life. Memoirs tend to be more topical, consisting of bits of experience, selected to illustrate a particular theme. In this story, the narrator characterizes her now dying father by remembering scenes and experiences with him from her childhood. Through memories she shows his courage and quick action in saving his cat, his pride and compassion in carrying his drunken father home, his thoughtfulness in keeping the relationships between his children and his grandfather free of his own issues with his father, and his struggle with depression that challenged him until he succumbed and had to be saved himself. Despite the obstacles in his life, he seems to have been a positive person and a loving father. When he finds out that he is dying, he only says, □I am sixty-four years old and I have had a good life.□ He is relatively young to be dying, but he has overcome so much and lived a life rich in love. Through her memories of her father, the narrator shows her love for him, and she keeps his humble and affectionate spirit alive.

Memory is evoked through the physical senses. Smell is, in many ways, the strongest memory inducer because it is complex, thorough, and visceral. Particular smells can bring back memories and connected emotions. Sometimes the memory is unconscious until a person encounters the smell that brings the memory to consciousness. The narrator recalls, while thinking about her grandfather: □I fell in love with a boy who smelled like him only to later realize that the treasured memory I carried of your father was one of straight bourbon and cigarette gone to ash.□ Bourbon and cigarettes are not necessarily nice smells, but the narrator has connected them with her grandfather, whom she loves, so for her those smells bring on good memories and feelings. This association of smell with the grandfather also reveals the significance for the narrator's father of having a father himself who was an alcoholic.

The eleven-year-old son of Jeannie, the narrator's sister, has his fond memories of his grandfather tied up in word and sound. He is the narrator's nephew, her father's eldest grandchild. He remembers all of the stories that his grandfather told him while he was growing up. He sits by his grandfather's bed as the older man is dying, remembering those stories and telling them back to him. The narrator says that her father and this boy have a similar ability to remember details: □It is a secret he shares with you.□ The stories the boy tells to his grandfather are a comfort to them both, a sign of their intimacy. Like the narrator with her memories of her father, the nephew retells these stories; telling them is his way of keeping his grandfather alive. All of his grandchildren have been given stories, and they now come to their grandfather with secrets and

kisses to make him smile. The narrator can also connect to her father through a story he read to her. Her favorite fairytale as a child was Hans Christian Andersen's □The Little Match Girl.□ The story made her cry, and she liked crying because she felt it prepared her to lose people she loved such as her father (to depression) and her grandfather (to throat cancer). Many years later, watching her father slowly die, the narrator sees herself again as the match girl, and she concludes, □every word, every image is a match struck in an attempt to hold on.□ □Fish□ is the narrator's metaphorical box of spent matches.

Trying to remind their father of better times, to bring him comfort, the narrator, Jeannie, and their mother sing to him even though he is past being able to respond or even blink a reply. These songs are like stylized memories of happier days. They sing his favorite songs, popular love tunes from the 1930s such as □Blue Moon□ and □All of Me.□ This music is also a comfort for the women. Even though he cannot reply, they continue to sing, feeling close to him through the music that he loved.

The narrator has a vivid memory from the summer of 1963 when she was five years old and her sister was nine. She remembers the tactile experience of cleaning red Play-Doh from the braided rug of their rented beach cottage in South Carolina. The work and the repentance involved in cleaning that rug struck her even then, young as she was, as having the potential to be an enduring memory.

I knew even as I sat there, rubbing and picking, that I would never forget, that I would think of it often. That I would grow up to believe that rectifying a mistake is sometimes reason enough to exist.

Memory is notable for its unreliability when held up against fact. So much of what people experience through their senses is ultimately colored by a partial understanding of events, by emotion, prejudice, preference, even by attention span. Given all the filters, the actual facts concerning an event can be drastically altered as they are housed in memory, making memory a potentially unreliable way to collect history. But memory is important to one's self concept and one's sense of personal history. As emotional and subjective as memory is, it is the retrieval mechanism people have by which to revisit the past. In her memories, the narrator stores her love of her father, love that can be communicated to others when she reminisces.

The memories relived in □Fish□ range from small, almost trivial events to momentous occasions. The narrator remembers how her grandfather held her hand when they crossed the street. She thinks about how her father freed his cat and how he carried his drunken father home. She recalls her father in the hospital being treated for depression and how she and her sister visited him, wanting him to come home. Given the emotional nature of memory, not all recollections are momentous. It is what the memory comes to signify that matters most.

The narrator recalls going fishing with her father. He helped her cut loose a toadfish that had swallowed her hook and threw the fish back into the water. The narrator recalls her father clearly□the gaiety and laughter overlaying a shadow of old disappointment. He

told her, □just think of the fishtales he'll have for his children and grandchildren. He will always be the one that got away.□ This fish served as a metaphor for her father; both the fish and her father had a close escape from death. His stories have now become his daughter's memories.

The narrator draws on these memories as a way to keep her father's spirit alive, to figuratively resurrect him from his deathbed. On the outside, she sings to him his favorite love songs, playing to his own sense of memory in order to comfort him. Inside, she relives her memories of their lives just as her nephew relives his grandfather's stories by reciting them back to him. Their recitals are a requiem, or lament, for the dead, except for the reoccurring theme of resurrection and for the narrator's dreams at the end of the story. Through memory, she has found a part of her father□the stories of his life□that is still vibrant and alive. Although her father dies, she has not given up on his life. □You are my heart,□ he tells her, □that's all that there is.□ A few days later, she replies, □I'll be looking for you.□ The narrator's father will always be there, captured within his daughter's memories of him.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on □Fish,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

McCorkle is a Southern writer. All of her novels and short stories are set in or around the fictional town of Fulton, North Carolina. What landscape have you grown up in? How would you describe it to others, both those who are familiar and those who are unfamiliar with the place where you grew up? Write a story, create a movie, or record a podcast to evoke that landscape and its people.

Depression is a serious illness that can be debilitating. Research the history, symptoms, and treatments for depression. How is depression represented in this story? Write a short research paper about what you learn.

A good title points to the central idea or subject of a story. Form a small group with a couple other students, and discuss the title's various meanings for this story, as it connects both to the story's characters and its events. Give a five-minute presentation about your conclusions.

Listen to recordings of the songs mentioned in the story, such as □Blue Moon□ and □When You're Smiling.□ Who were they written and originally performed by? When were they first recorded? What do these songs tell you about the father in the story, knowing that these were his favorite? Put on a class presentation in which you play recordings of these songs and explain their relevance in the story as a way of characterizing the father and placing him in a certain time period.

Read the rest of McCorkle's collection *Creatures of Habit*. Does □Fish□ make more sense in context with the other stories? How effective is her use of animal titles? What do you think the title of the book means? Write an essay comparing □Fish□ to one or two other stories in the collection.

What Do I Read Next?

Downhome: An Anthology of Southern Women Writers (1995), edited by Susie Mee, is a collection of fiction, spanning many decades, from powerful voices of women in the South such as Lee Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, and Flannery O'Connor.

July 7th (1984), one of McCorkle's first two novels, tells with humor and action the tale of an unsolved murder at a small town convenience store.

The Cheer Leader (1984), one of McCorkle's first two published novels, tells the story of Jo Spencer, a young woman who is perfect and accomplished in every way until one year in college when her life spirals out of control.

Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* (1995) is a novel about the Owens sisters, who are raised by their aunts who practice magic. As adults, the sisters both escape this strange life, but eventually they are drawn back to their childhood home in a small New England town for a surprising revelation.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, tells the story of Janie Crawford, a black woman in her forties during the late nineteenth century. Janie tells her life story (which includes three marriages) to her friend Pheoby. Hurston was a renowned African American folklorist and author from the South.

Oral History (1983), by Southern writer Lee Smith, is a novel about a young woman in college who returns to her home in Appalachian Virginia to record an oral history of her family. The story she hears includes information about a curse, murder, and suicide.

Harper Lee's 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is the story of an eight-year-old girl, her brother, and their lawyer father during the Depression in Alabama. In their town, a black man is accused of raping a white girl, and the lawyer defends the black man but loses the case due to local racial prejudice.

The Optimist's Daughter (1972), by Eudora Welty, is a novel about Laurel Hand, a woman who returns home to Mississippi when her stalwart father falls ill and then dies. Laurel reflects upon her past and comes to a better understanding of her family. Welty's novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), Carson McCullers's first novel, is about a deaf-mute man in a 1930s Georgia mill town and the lives of four of his close acquaintances.

Further Study

Atherton, Lewis Eldon, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, Indiana University Press, 1954.

Atherton examines the life and death of small towns in the Midwest from 1865 to 1950.

Bennett, Barbara, *Understanding Jill McCorkle*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, University of South Carolina Press, 2000.

Bennett analyzes McCorkle's novels and short stories to date, including a brief overview of her life.

Spielman, David G., and William W. Starr, *Southern Writers*, University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

Spielman photographed seventy-two Southern authors in the spaces where they create their stories. The text is written by Starr.

Zinsser, William, *How to Write a Memoir*, HarperAudio, 1999, 1 cassette.

Zinsser explains what makes a good memoir, how to decide what to write about, and more, citing examples from famous memoir writers such as Eudora Welty and Frank McCourt.

Bibliography

Manning, Jo, Review of *Creatures of Habit*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 126, No. 12, July 2001, p. 128.

McCorkle, Jill, □Fish,□ in *Creatures of Habit*, Algonquin Books, 2001, pp. 227-40.

Review of *Creatures of Habit*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 248, No. 37, September 10, 2001, p. 58.

Wilkinson, Joanne, Review of *Creatures of Habit*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 97, No. 21, July 2001, p. 1982.

Williams, Susan Millar, □Small Town Girls,□ in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 19, No. 1, October 2001, p. 16.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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