

Five Minutes in Heaven Short Guide

Five Minutes in Heaven by Lisa Alther

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

Five Minutes in Heaven Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

Alther's main character, Jude, is the quintessential picaresque heroine in this multifaceted adventure. A proud, reserved person with a quick intelligence and a lively sense of humor, Jude has the ability to be present in many scenes but fully part of none.

Elusive and androgynous to the point where the reader is unsure of what she exactly looks like, her style is to have no style, no distinctive presentation which defines her. Boyish enough to pass for a man, as a child she went without a shirt and earned respect by being able to urinate while standing.

Like her appearance, her sexuality is ambiguous: Molly and Sandy would have preferred her to be a boy. But in a matter of hours, Anna had erased all that, leaving Jude grateful to be a female, and the more female, the better.

Although in Alther's fiction initiation experiences very often involve bisexuality and lesbianism, Jude is the first of Alther's protagonists to have a woman as her most significant love object. The motif of friendship, especially friendship between women, is overturned as well. Most of Jude's close friends are men, and she frequently seems puzzled by her relationships with other women.

Simon, her sometimes lover, co-worker, and friend, remains the most constant presence in her emotional life, in an understated affirmation of the stoic virtues of reliability over the transitory ecstasies of passion.

Indeed, Alther's characters often search for or appear as part of a lost brother-sister dyad — blond Sandy to Jude-Molly — and even the sophisticated Jasmine idealizes her lost older brother. These androgynous duos seem to create a Platonic situation in Alther's work, where characters search forever for the other half which will complete them. The union of opposites into one whole is what drives the characters through their lives.

The search for the other, although marked by union, ends in loss — by death, of course, but also by betrayal.

The loved object can never be possessed completely, as Molly rejects Jude's girlish love, and Sandy and Anna remain fatally attracted to that which destroys them — rough trade and drink.

Sandy, like his soul-mate Jude, is an introverted intellectual attracted to the passionate and powerful — his lover Simon, a brash Englishman, and the dangerous toughs he finds on the street. Anna, the tragic lover who introduces Jude to the joys and dangers of adult passion, dies a lingering, painful death from alcoholism, unable to defeat the self-destructive forces which drive her, choosing death instead of the life together she has promised.



Others personify these death-dealing impulses — Ace Kilgore, who steals and destroys Molly, the gay-bashers who kill Sandy, Anna's sadistic, brutal husband, and in the macrocosm, the Nazi occupiers of France and those who massacred Jude's Huguenot ancestors on St. Bartholomew's Day. Always, in the highly charged psycho-sexuality of Alther's world, these forces are present, both in the outside and the inside, as the characters own self-destructive psyches drive them toward these death-dealing sirens. Perhaps the most graphic representative of these is the stripper Olivia whom Jude pursues through the dark streets of Paris, enticing, available, yet elusive even when possessed.



Social Concerns

Growing up to find and take one's place in society is always a matter of importance, especially for those whose place is unconventional or marginal. In *Five Minutes in Heaven*, the young woman protagonist, Jude, follows the trail of her identity from her home in Kentucky's Smoky Mountains to New York City and then to Paris, searching for love, work, and selfhood. As a bisexual woman, Jude is accompanied by both friends and lovers, including her childhood friends Molly and Sandy, her older married lover Anna, and the enigmatic Parisians she finds at the furthest reaches of her journey.

Although Jude's own lesbianism is reserved and apolitical, as befits her character, her journey leads her to a communal house in New York City, where she is reunited with not only her childhood friend Sandy, who also becomes a lover, and meets his friend/lover Simon, and their friends in New York's homosexual subculture during the Stonewall days. Sandy is killed, presumably by a gang of homophobic toughs, and the sexual revolution, although fulfilling, is riddled with danger, both from the outside and from sadomasochistic impulses on the inside, such as those which both drive and consume Jude's lover Anna. The more cosmopolitan atmosphere of Paris, while chasing away the most frightening nightmares connected with the death of Sandy, and later that of Anna from alcohol poisoning, ushers in a yet more nuanced and ambivalent set of imperatives, from which she returns to an uncertain but less haunted future in New York City.

The chronology of *Five Minutes in Heaven* stretches from the end of World War II to the Cold War (Ace's gang, the Commie Killers, regularly blow up cats called Hiroshima with cherry bombs), through the conventional fifties, with football and kissing games (*Five Minutes in Heaven*), through the Vietnam War and the sexual revolution of the sixties — musical mattresses, cruising, and threesomes — the self-awareness decade of the seventies, and into the uncertainty of the eighties. The ability, indeed the imperative, to create the self anew in a never-ending quest for a total freedom and self-realization is the quintessential American paradigm.

Identity, both personal and sexual, is a central concern of this novel. Since the major characters in *Five Minutes in Heaven* are bisexual — Jude herself, of course, but also Sandy, Simon, Anna, Jasmine, and a host of others, even the difficult task of growing up homosexual is complicated with a sense of identity which is forever unfixed, created by individual choices day by day. The paramount issue is not gender itself, but the goals of sexuality and of life itself, which are the ability to achieve *joie de vivre*, both in the erotic sense, and in that of simply enjoying life in the face of pain and loss. The French seem to embody this — "they seemed to know how to enjoy life, despite its legacy of horror and its inevitable end." At the other end of the spectrum is *thanatos*, the urge to destroy, or to die. The tension between these two constructs not only individuals, but nations as well.

Techniques

The novel's four parts are named for the four major characters — Molly, Sandy, Anna, and finally Jude herself, as each character in turn embodies parts of Jude's psyche, which all converge at the end. The movement from place to place — Kentucky, New York, and Paris — shows the progression from childhood to adulthood against a backdrop of culture and history.

Alther places her characters precisely in times and places which although highly individualized and particularized, are linked by memory and recollection to form a tightly woven background. The dialogue and details of childhood and adolescence in Kentucky — holy rollers, kissing games, and Jude's memories of her mother — interlock with young adulthood in New York, with its new friendships, mysteries, and mores — and with the even more alien world of Parisians, puzzling creatures who speak a Lacanian dialect and whose every gesture has a hidden meaning. "Graveyard love" — the emotion, but also bones, burials, tombs, and of course ghosts — continues to resonate.

The narration, unlike Alther's trademark double-shift, maintains a steady gaze which, although sharing Jude's subjectivity, reliably depicts the scene itself. These characters — intellectual, perceptive, verbal, and self-examining — spend much dialogue theorizing about their own personal and collective psyches, and Jude herself often stands somewhat apart from even her own consciousness and experience, criticizing and analyzing.

Because Jude's habit of mind is so quizzical and humorous, and because her picaresque character is so often bemused, puzzled, or just plain deceived, the novel is gently ironic, restrained and somewhat reticent even at moments of deepest feeling. Indeed, this stance seems to be what is required to survive the sense of loss and impermanence, even horror, which underlies the novel's surface. Speech and actions, even when pathetic or pompous, are treated with a light hand. Gone are the stock characters and broad satirical portraits of some of the earlier novels, along with the fictional Vermont backwoods which had been their home. In its place is an elegiac, somewhat stoical attitude, where memory renders both love and loss permanent.

Themes

The themes of growing up, initiation, and identity are paramount in Alther's work, and Jude's odyssey from girlhood to womanhood encompasses the embattled childhood of a tomboy raised by an adored yet somewhat preoccupied part-Cherokee father and a black housekeeper. She and her best friends, Molly and Sandy, do battle with the forces of conventional Southern womanhood and macho manhood until, undone by puberty, Molly dies in a car wreck instigated by her boyfriend Ace Kilgore, their childhood *bete noire*.

Although Jude learns to mask her tomboy identity and her unconventionality in small-town high school forms, she remains haunted by her differentness until her arrival at graduate school in New York, where she is reunited with, and then loses, Sandy, and meets the older woman poet Anna, who becomes her doomed lover.

Sex and death are always found close together for Jude. Her mother died in childbirth when Jude was very young and all three of her lovers — Molly, Sandy, and Anna — die in violent and partially self-inflicted ways.

Jude herself suffers a symbolic death in the underground catacombs of Paris, where in a dream the dead give her permission to live.

Childhood and the family are important themes in Alther's fiction, intensified by the family's imperative to bring in the alien, as when Jude's Yankee mother marries her part-Cherokee, Southern father — her grandparents called him "the hillbilly" — and the black housekeeper Clementine becomes her surrogate mother. Family provides her roots in the Appalachian hills, for which she always feels kinship, and also a landing place in New York, where she is united with her French grandparents. Friends also become an extended family — Sandy and Simon in the commune and the ruling matriarchy which takes her into the French publishing house where she works.

Friendship, which for Alther's bisexual characters, always involves the lovers' dimension; always involves both communion and betrayal, closeness and estrangement. Jude's infatuation with the elusive French stripper Olivia, who signifies the promise of easy access but yet remains always estranged, brings Jude back from the danger of her journey's furthest reaches — total loss of one's roots and selfhood — to help her reclaim solid ground, back in New York, and the more possible promise of love and friendship as two aspects of the same experience. Isolation, however, is a constant for Alther's characters, for whom union with the other is always momentary and transitory, and the essential experience is one of loneliness interspersed with moments of connection. Thus, Jude's encounter with French intellectual theories serves only to illuminate a constant of her American experience — the essential isolation of the self who is a pioneer, and the ongoing search for even further frontiers. She is the American drifter, wearing cowboy boots around Paris.



Key Questions

Five Minutes in Heaven would be a good choice for the women's studies classroom or reading group, and the presence of positive male characters such as Sandy and Simon make it attractive for mixed groups as well.

1. Jude and Sandy are two young people struggling to find and maintain their identity in a setting in which they often have to struggle. What personal qualities help them, and how does their friendship help them survive?
2. How does Jude's identification and relationship with her father contribute to her developing self awareness? How does her encounter with her maternal grandparents in New York help her understand more about herself and her family?
3. Jude's friend Simon is a rather mysterious figure. What does he contribute to the novel?
4. Her affair with Anna proves to be a dangerous one for Jude. What draws them together, and what is Alther saying about such relationships, whether they are same-sex or heterosexual?
5. Jude never does quite figure out what's going on with her French friends and their particular kind of chatter. What does she learn from them? How does her encounter with Olivia fit in?

Literary Precedents

The young hero's journey to adulthood is a paradigm of American literature itself, of course, given the additional resonance of exile when that journey leads to Europe, as it does especially in Henry James and Edith Wharton, where comedy of manners is found as well. Ghosts also accompanied James Baldwin's character Sonny to Paris. The coming of age novel is a staple of the feminist literature of the 1960s and 1970s, as in Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972), Erica Jong, and Margaret Atwood.

The coming of age experience for young lesbian or bisexual woman was explored earlier both in fiction and autobiography by Jill Johnston, Del Martin, and Phyllis Lyon (*Lesbian/Woman*, 1972), and Kate Millett, Judy Grahn, and Dorothy Allison, whose praise decorates the dust cover of *Five Minutes in Heaven*, and Rita Mae Brown, whose central character in *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) shares the name Molly with Jude's young friend.

Allison and Brown also share Alther's Southern setting, along with Ellen Gilchrist, Alice Adams, and others who chronicle the interior of American memory.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, 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, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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