

Fly Away Home Short Guide

Fly Away Home by Marge Piercy

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

Fly Away Home Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

Fly Away Home is Daria Walker's story, and Daria is a "Piercy protagonist" through and through. A wife and mother whose marriage has raised her out of the laboring class, Daria's sense of self derives solely from her domestic roles. She is a mother, a wife, a housekeeper enamored of her lovely home, a good cook and — almost incidentally — a best-selling cookbook writer with her own TV show.

Despite this semblance of security, Daria, at forty-three, knows there are cracks. She and Ross have no sex life.

Her daughters rarely speak. Preferring the aesthetic side of her work to the business side, Daria has no idea of her net worth or annual income. Although she earns more than he does, Ross belittles her work, calling her, with scorn, a writer of "fat books." It is no career. Still, Daria ignores all murmurs of trouble in paradise, until her mother dies unexpectedly. This trauma is followed, in short order, by Ross's demand for a divorce, one daughter's "defection to Daddy and his new love," public accusations of complicity in her husband's crimes, and, finally, the burning of her home.

An obsessive list-maker, Daria and her lifestyle careen to a halt when she is confronted with "the facts" of her life, and must examine them. An unconventional feminist, Daria becomes one, nonetheless.

Ross — Daria's near-demonic spouse — is a vaguely drawn and wholly unappealing character. Frequently cited as this novel's weak link, he seems one-dimensional, a "caricature of a man facing a mid-life crisis." It is not clear what has turned this once idealistic, young law student with a social conscience (and loving wife) into a prejudiced, middle-aged crook. Because Daria never learns the answer to that question, neither do we.

Ross runs. He worships money and physical fitness. Believing himself on the brink of fiscal ruin, he tries to burn up his wife in the house they once shared. Despite these clues, what motivates Ross ultimately remains a mystery.

Piercy does provide a male character to redeem his sex in Fly Away Home.

Daria's new lover, Tom, is a lovable guy. He may be just a bit too lovable to be believed, but implausibility aside, his appearance is satisfying. Together with Tom — although not exclusively — Daria creates a new "home" for herself, one more communal and less conventional than what she has previously known. Ellen Sweet calls this Piercy's "scaled down utopia," and suggests its combination of social awareness and domestic contentment may finally be "more revolutionary than her more obviously radical novels".



Social Concerns/Themes

Piercy's eighth novel, *Fly Away Home*, is a most successful attempt to wed social consciousness with domestic drama. In this novel, Daria Walker awakens from the illusion — or delusion — of her upwardly mobile marriage, and her picture-perfect, sheltered, suburban life. Forced to confront her husband's adultery and his unethical, exploitive business practices, Daria does indeed grow, gain awareness, and become politicized. When she learns her husband, Ross, has been hiring arsonists to burn his own buildings, Daria draws her head out of the sand, and joins former tenants in their quest for safe shelter. Daria's postdivorce affair with a working-class carpenter (and bookworm) returns her to the core values — mutual and self-respect, the worth of work — with which she was raised, values she may have lost sight of during her years in "suburban semislumber."

Jane O'Reilly calls this tome "a romance with a social conscience, a tale of love, betrayal and revenge set against a backdrop of ... the evils of gentrification and the uses of arson as a slum-clearance tool." Ellen Sweet adds: "In place of large visionary utopias, *Fly Away Home* is about a "small" subject all too familiar in recent novels: a conventional woman coming to awareness because of divorce. But Piercy . . . manages to turn this hackneyed theme into something new and appealing: a romance with a vision of domestic life only a feminist could imagine. Although her novel has a strong subplot dealing with social change through political action, at its heart is Piercy's faith in the transforming value of love and intimacy."



Techniques

Piercy's prose has been typed by critic Jane O'Reilly as "relentlessly accurate," with "familiar figures earnest even about their jokes" revealing inner lives that "run to obsessive listmaking". *Fly Away Home* fits that type.

The narrative unfolds from a third-person, limited omniscient point of view — Daria's — and while it incorporates much dialogue, the singular perspective is never truly augmented. Some critics contend this viewpoint inhibits complete characterization for all but Daria, and they cite its very "limitation" as a flaw. Others believe it preserves suspense. As Daria sleuths to solve riddles, so do readers.

Daria wonders, questions for herself frequently in this novel, which then becomes a device for furthering the plot, detective-style. Her transformations cohere in metaphoric dualities: ashes and rebirth, parking lots and gardens, fire and earth. Hence, while the subject matter of *Fly Away Home* is dire, the mood, overall, is "translucent and affirmative" (Sweet). Ultimately, Susan Mernit says, this "rich and entertaining book asks us to consider ourselves as part of a social network beyond the isolated nuclear family." And, she adds: "Piercy's zeal to tell us how we should live our lives strains her prose; her determination to tell us something specific about our society interferes with the spontaneity of the story. A keen observer, she is capable of dazzling and sensual descriptions; yet, on occasion, her conversations between characters seem trumped-up.

As fine as her feeling for language is, here it operates in fits and starts."



Key Questions

In this novel, does Piercy successfully wed social consciousness with domestic drama? Discussion surrounding the ways in which *Fly Away Home* works (or does not work) as a bildungsroman for adults, a mystery, a love story may yield astute observations about the nature of each, and about the efficacy with which this author blends genres. Examination of the historical milieu of the 1970s and women's struggles therein for legal equality, safe shelter and freedom from domestic violence will provide a backdrop for making sense of Daria's development, and the not-so-latent social activism Piercy advocates with this novel.

1. Is the singular viewpoint from which this story is told an asset, a liability, or both? What leads you to this conclusion?
2. Do you find images of birth/ death/the cyclical nature of life evident in this novel? If yes, where? What are they?
3. How does *Fly Away Home* ask us to "consider ourselves as part of a social network beyond the isolated nuclear family?"
4. Rank the several events in this narrative which contribute to Daria's spiritual awakening. Which seems most significant, and why?
5. Does *Fly Away Home* seem needlessly polemical? If yes, which passages support that claim?
6. Which "pairs" of characters best illustrate inequities attributed to "class"? What behaviors reflect Daria's own struggle with class consciousness?
7. In what ways does Daria typify and defy the stereotypical forty-plus-year-old American female of her day?
8. What is the crux of the argument in this novel against gentrification?
9. What might lead a reviewer to suggest that the male characters in this novel are "thinly drawn?"



Literary Precedents

No doubt this author is acquainted with prototypic, strong, female protagonists who forge identities socially beyond maternal and marital bonds.

Fly Away Home recalls Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929); parallels, however, are perhaps nowhere clearer than between Piercy's Daria, and Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879). Like Nora, Daria is demeaned and patronized by a husband who keeps her "in the dark"; like Nora, she learns of his unscrupulous, contemptuous treatment of others in the name of profiteering; therefore, although both find it painful to leave the domesticity each loves, leave they do.

Piercy's *Fly Away Home* has been likened, also, to the work of "Meridel LeSueur and other Socialist writers of the 1930's," as she "attempts to deal directly with what she sees as the pressing issues of American life: class struggle, gentrification, the emotional impoverishment of the nuclear family".

Related Titles

Most novels Marge Piercy has written feature female protagonists struggling to make places for themselves on their own terms in a wider world that privileges males, and privileges females when they are linked with males, most notably by marriage. *Fly Away Home*, thus, has much in common with *The Longings of Women* (1994), and with many of Piercy's poems. Moreover, it explores terrain travelled frequently by female fiction authors who, like Piercy, were first published in the late 1960s, and shortly thereafter. These include: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Erica Jong, Alice Munro, Doris Lessing, and, later, Ann Beattie.



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