

Fortune Smiles: Stories Study Guide

Fortune Smiles: Stories by Adam Johnson

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Plot Summary

“Fortune Smiles” is a collection of six short stories by Adam Johnson which recounts the stories of people in unusual situations in life. In “Nirvana,” the narrator tends to his wife, Charlotte, who has been temporarily paralyzed following a bad flu. To help keep her mind off of things, Charlotte listens to Nirvana for hours at a time. Her husband, meanwhile, develops a code that allows him to generate a holographic image of a person. The narrator generates the image of the recently-assassinated President to ask him about life, death, and marriage. The narrator is worried that his wife may try to commit suicide. He ultimately programs an image of Kurt Cobain to talk to Charlotte and keep her company. Charlotte tells the projection of Cobain that he should not commit suicide, that it would hurt her too much.

In “Hurricanes Anonymous,” Randall “Nonc” Richard, a UPS deliveryman, is stunned to discover in the days after Hurricane Katrina that his ex-wife has dropped off their son in his truck and disappeared. Nonc and his girlfriend, Nelle, care for the child and begin planning a life together while Nonc tries to find out what happened to his ex-wife. At the same time, Nonc receives word that his father is dying of cancer out in Los Angeles after having stolen Nonc’s car to get out there. Nonc comes to learn his ex-wife has been arrested for being involved with a drug dealer who used her phone to transact a deal. Nonc makes peace with his father over the phone, and decides on a new start with Nelle, beginning by visiting his father in LA.

In “Interesting Facts,” the narrator is a breast cancer survivor who struggles to adapt after having her breasts removed. She has a difficult time believing and accepting that her husband could still find her sexually attractive, and that her husband doesn’t want to be with anybody else. She asks him how long he would wait to love again if she died, but he responds that this will never happen because they will both die together. The narrator comes to realize she has drifted too far from her family, and needs to reconnect with them.

In “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine,” Hans is the former administrative head of the dreaded Hohenschonhausen Prison, which has been converted into a museum. Hans, divorced, lives just down the block and is angered to learn that tourists are being told that torture was carried out at the prison when Hans believes no such thing ever occurred. Hans participates in a tour in which he challenges the assertions of Berta, a former inmate-turned-guide, pointing out that what she calls an isolation room was in reality a janitorial closet, or that dousing prisoners with water cannot be considered torture. Hans insists on proving it by putting himself in place of a prisoner and having water poured on him, during which time he thinks back on life in East Germany before the end of the Cold War.

In “Dark Meadows,” the narrator works as an IT repairman and is known among child pornography makers and users as the man to be in touch with should there be an issue. The narrator himself was raped as a child, and now walks a strange line between right and wrong. He assists child porn users in destroying their files, but also encodes the



files to make them easier to locate. He submits the master code to the police which will put all such users on a map for purposes of justice. Meanwhile, the narrator is both sexually attracted to the young girls who live next door to him.

In "Fortune Smiles," DJ and Sun-ho are North Korean defectors now living in South Korea. Though thrilled to be away from the dictator, both are having a difficult time adjusting to life in a free South. Sun-ho especially misses a girl from the North named Willow. He frequently attaches gifts to balloons to send across the DMZ more as a gesture than actual hope that Willow will receive them. Sun-ho ultimately becomes too melancholy without Willow, so he secures dozens of large balloons to a lawn chair and decides to fly himself back across the DMZ.



Nirvana – Hurricanes Anonymous

Summary

"Nirvana" – The narrator's wife, Charlotte, is temporarily paralyzed from the shoulders down and is bedridden following a simple flu. Charlotte tries to keep her mind off the pain and her situation by listening to Nirvana through headphones. The narrator worries about his wife killing herself since she is unhappy with the paralysis, and because she doesn't believe it is temporary. Reading Joseph Heller's autobiography doesn't help much, since Joseph Heller recovers from illness to leave his wife and marry his nurse. Charlotte dislikes how the narrator has iProjector computer-generated talks with a hologram of the recently-assassinated President each night. The narrator has constructed the president from lines of code out of the feeling of needing to save someone.

The narrator asks the holographic President about his life with the First Lady, if they ever talked about the future or what to do in bad situations. The President responds that one's only duty is to be in service any way one can. He tells the narrator to seek his inner resolve. Charlotte tells the narrator she could use some help locating her own inner resolve. She is happy that the narrator has been taking care of her roses out in the garden for her. The narrator has taken time off from work to be with Charlotte. At work, the narrator writes code for a company called Reputation Curator, which scours the internet for bad reviews and threatens the reviewers to withdraw them.

At home, Sanjay, the narrator's boss, swings by with a hash reader and lets the narrator know the Secret Service stopped by out of interest in the narrator's projectioning. Sanjay foresees the narrator's algorithm used to bring peoples' personalities to life all over the world, to scrub the internet clean, and offers the narrator stock in the company in exchange for partnership. Meanwhile, the narrator uses the hash reader to crack the encryption on an old government drone. Sanjay explains everyone at work is worried about the narrator. The narrator later speaks alone to the president, asking again of marriage, children, and life. The President tells the narrator to return home and start a new chapter in life.

At Charlotte's insistence, she and the narrator begin to have sex, but the circumstances cause the narrator to lose focus. The narrator knows that if Charlotte ends up pregnant, she won't harm herself for at least nine months. The narrator then creates a projection of Kurt Cobain, which his wife is thrilled with. She tells the projection of Kurt not to commit suicide, because it will hurt her too much.

"Hurricanes Anonymous" – Randall Richard, known as "Nonc" to his son, is a UPS driver out on delivery in Lake Charles, Louisiana, not long after Hurricane Katrina, with his son Geronimo in the passenger seat. Nonc has had a kind of custody over his son since his ex-wife Marnie dropped the boy off without warning in the UPS van the day after Katrina. She has since disappeared. Nonc's girlfriend, Cherelle (Relle), loves the



child and loves how Geronimo calls Randall “Nonc.” Nonc is from the Cajun word “n’oucle,” meant for close family friends. Nonc makes a delivery at Chuck E. Cheese’s, a Christian-owned company that is open and helping residents who have lost everything in the storm. Nonc resents this because no one helped him out last year when he was evicted. He is also burdened by knowledge that his father is in Los Angeles and is dying from cancer. Nonc does not get along well with his father, especially after his father stole his car and drove to LA.

Nonc makes a delivery to Bob Vollman, an avid birdwatcher. Bob reveals he has two kids in college and has had a surprise third kid. Nonc then swings by the Southwest Louisiana Visitor Center where Relle works. Waiting for her to take a break, he goes into a roadhouse and inquires as to whether anyone has seen Marnie. Relle sees Nonc has been visibly upset by the call about his father. She also contends that Nonc should consider the fact that Marnie might be dead. She takes a swab sample from Nonc’s mouth, and from Geronimo’s mouth, for a free FEMA DNA test. Nonc is annoyed and thinks it is unnecessary. Nonc then returns to the UPS yard for another round of packages. One of them is for Nonc himself, from his father. The box contains his father’s personal effects, including keys and clothes. It is strange for Nonc to think his father will never get dressed again.

Nonc and Relle attend Alcoholics Anonymous at the Presbyterian church. Relle talks about how her boyfriend won’t take a helping hand. Nonc suggests maybe it isn’t needed. Everyone else assembled hopes Nonc will take Relle’s hand. During break, Nonc and Relle have sex in Nonc’s UPS van. Relle insists she wants a future with Nonc, but needs Nonc to be all in. She thinks they should become guides for hunters and begin a new living that way. They later visit with Dr. Gaby, who oversees the halfway house of sorts where Nonc stays. Dr. Gaby is helping with emergency relief services. A nurse from LA calls with a written message from Nonc’s father, who can no longer speak. Nonc gets on the phone with his dad so his dad can listen to Geronimo say hello. Nonc then tells his father he holds no grudges and to let things go.

Making a delivery to the Calcasieu Jail, Nonc asks to see Marnie Broussard on a whim. To his surprise, she is brought out to see him. She asks about Geronimo; Nonc assures her their son is well. Marnie insists her imprisonment is a mistake, that the guy she was seeing—Allen—was into bad stuff. She said she made the mistake of letting Allen use her phone, and that the law thinks she was the one who made the delivery. Nonc decides to go to California with Relle to see his father, but tells Gaby he is not sure when they will be back. Gaby will watch Geronimo. Nonc leaves his DIAD with Geronimo so that he can always know where Geronimo is. Nonc comes to feel as if everything is going to be okay.

Analysis

“Fortune Smiles” is a collection of six short stories by Adam Johnson which recounts the stories of people in unusual situations in life. Life becomes an important theme in the first two stories in the collection, “Nirvana” and “Hurricanes Anonymous.” In both stories,



life has handed the characters some serious challenges and put them into bad situations. In “Nirvana”, the narrator worries his wife, temporarily paralyzed, may commit suicide, while in “Hurricanes Anonymous,” the narrator must care for his son, girlfriend, make peace with his selfish father, and must locate his missing ex-wife in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These are situations neither the narrator in “Nirvana”, Charlotte, or Nonc ever though they’d be faced with.

The Past also emerges as an important theme through these two stories. The past has a tremendous bearing on the present. Nonc’s childhood was difficult at best as his father took advantage of his family materially and emotionally, doing what he wanted and always putting them last. It explains why Nonc has such a difficult time feeling anything for his father who is now on his deathbed. For the narrator of “Nirvana,” the past becomes a critical tool in order to raise consciousness of the tragic and heartbreaking implications of suicide by reconstructing a holographic image of Kurt Cobain. The narrator thus relies on the past to influence the present successfully.

Morality also plays an important part in these stories thematically, as the reader will note. The narrator’s decision in “Nirvana” to stay at home with his wife, to care for her, and to ensure she does not commit suicide is a moral imperative for the narrator. He knows it is morally right to care for his wife and to make sure that she will survive the ordeal. Morality also weighs heavily on the mind of Nonc in “Hurricane Anonymous.” Nonc must reconcile his horrifying past relationship with his father with the fact that his father is dying. Rather than being dragged down by the past and having the last laugh over his father, Nonc decides to forgive his father and make things right between them so his father may die in peace, and so that he may have peace in his own life. Nonc has taken a difficult situation and done something good with it. This is also reflected in his unhesitating decision to care for his son.

For Nonc and for the narrator of “Nirvana,” family is crucial to their lives. The only family the narrator in “Nirvana” has is his wife, so beyond the moral imperative to care for her, there is a sense of love and loyalty for his wife that is paramount. Likewise, though Nonc’s ex-wife may have messed up badly, his son’s welfare is predominant so Nonc has no second-thoughts about taking in Geronimo. While he may worry about his job and role as a father, Nonc does not second-guess himself when it comes to protecting his son. As a result, family becomes an important theme that will continue throughout the other four stories in the collection.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Nonc decide to forgive his father despite the past? What does it mean for Nonc in the present?



Discussion Question 2

Why do Nonc and the narrator of “Nirvana” so unhesitatingly commit to caring for their respective family? What does this mean for them in the situations they find themselves in?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator of “Nirvana” project an image of Kurt Cobain to his wife? Is he successful in his endeavor? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

algorithm, commencement, sonorous, melancholy, axon, induced, barren, uninflected, perennial, inherent, shimmies, synonymous, resilience, stagnant



Interesting Facts

Summary

The narrator of "Interesting Facts" is a woman who has survived breast cancer. Her husband is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author while she herself is an aspiring writer. They have just attended a local reading in San Francisco, where the narrator envies the writer more for her normal breasts than for her talent in writing. She also envies all the women who love her husband for his writing. The narrator and her husband have two young children, an artistically-inclined son, and a daughter who is a baking maverick. On the way home from the reading, the narrator and her husband stop to get condoms. The narrator has a difficult time believing that her husband would still want her despite her age and shape of her body following breast cancer survival. The narrator begins noting interesting facts about her life, such as that she normally sleeps 12 to 13 hours each night and that she chose not to have breast reconstruction.

The narrator reflects on the story read during the reading, about a fortysomething widower who finds love with a twentysomething girl 16 months after his wife dies. The narrator asks her husband how long he would wait. The husband tells the narrator she isn't going anywhere, that when the time comes, they'll go together.

The narrator reflects on how her best friend, Kitty, died of breast cancer. The narrator now spends much time in Golden Gate Park, noticing and sensing things, such as birds flying past to what the weather will be. The narrator notes how her husband has been losing weight lately, after having gained much weight by drinking too much during the most trying times in the past year. The narrator also knows she needs to double-down and reconnect with her family, because she has drifted away from them in the past year. She is also angry at her husband for using a character from one of her unpublished novels for one of his own. The narrator's own new third novel, still incomplete, is about Buffalo Calf Road Woman, a Cheyenne warrior killed Custer at Little Bighorn. The narrator believes that everything the family is currently going through will simply be a story for when they are all older.

Analysis

Life remains an important theme in "Interesting Facts." Life rarely ever turns out the way it is expected to in these stories, and the same is certainly true for the narrator in this one. The narrator has survived breast cancer, and has had both her breasts removed as a result. These become a physical reminder of what she has endured, and a physical reminder that nothing in life is guaranteed. This is especially important for the reader to note as the narrator realizes she is drifting from her family, and needs to reconnect with them. She may have nearly lost them battling breast cancer, but now she risks losing them, in a sense, by surviving.



The past also has a tremendous bearing on the narrator. In large part, the past consists not only of the cancer ordeal, but of who she was before and who she is after it. The narrator recognizes that her difficult past has made her feel like a ghost in the present, and has caused her to drift away from her family. The past is something she will now seek to overcome. She is free and alive to do this.

The reader should note, however, how dedicated the narrator's husband remains to her. He has not cheated on her, he has not left her, and he has not become angry with her for any reason. He morally remains committed to the woman he loves despite what life has caused her. However, his decision to use one of her characters for one of his own novels when his wife can't even get published is morally questionable. Given that the narrator has already lost so much due to cancer, the fact that her husband would rob her of something else so personally is unquestionably wrong.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator feel like a ghost? How does she feel she has drifted away from her family? What does she decide to do about this? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator have such a difficult time believing her husband still loves her and finds her sexually attractive?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator steal one of the narrator's characters for use in his own work? How does this affect the narrator? What are the moral implications of this?

Vocabulary

flaunted, excruciating, exuberant, subtle, fragility, indignities, cavalcade, inconsolable, ergonomic, arcane, acerbic, effervescence



George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine

Summary

In "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine," Hans, a former member of the East German Volkspolizei and former prison guard at Hohenschonhausen Prison, regularly receives letters from former inmates but rarely does more than skim them. It is 2008, and Hans has no shame or regrets about his work at the prison during the Cold War nearly twenty years before. Hans is divorced and owns a dog named Prinz. His ex-wife, Gitte, always rooted for the underdog, and loved Western music and literature, including the novel "1984". On the front lawn, Hans finds a package—the third one now—and decides to deal with it later. He can see the old prison, now a museum, just down the block. Some of the old prison guards and their families still live on the block, but many others have moved away to be rid of the past.

The museum annoys Hans since it is run by former inmates, and because the tour guides never mention that no prisoners were ever abused or tortured there. On a walk, Prinz uses the bathroom near a tree planted in memory of playwright Klaus Wexler who never wrote again after being imprisoned. The curator explains the tree to a group of kids. Hans challenges the curator, saying Wexler was a drug addict, money embezzler, pornographer. Hans reveals who he was, and says he took Wexler's confession personally. He says that Wexler admitted to having made no provision for his parents, and was prepared to abandon them when he sought to flee East Germany. Hans goes on to defy the curator, saying there was never any torture at the prison. Hans explains he was only a civil servant, that he didn't make the laws, and that he merely followed them.

At home, Hans rigs a camera to photograph the mystery package leaver. The first package to ever arrive contained the prison master's set of keys. The second contained a lens-quality glass ashtray, a souvenir gift from Gitte years before that went missing from Hans's prison office and was never found again. Hans now unwraps the third package, which contains a silver bracelet, a twentieth anniversary gift Hans purchased for Gitte. It makes him cry. Late that night, Hans's daughter calls and reveals there is a video of him on the internet insulting Wexler. The next morning, the curator invites Hans to coffee. He says the prison is open and welcome to all who wish to remember. Hans asks for the return of an old photo of himself and his wife. The curator explains it is now the property of the people of Germany. Hans goes onto explain his work was primarily administrative, but a man named Grunwald of the Stasi headed up interrogations.

The curator proposes that Hans lead a group of students through the prison to give a tour which will be recorded for the historical record. Hans agrees, protesting the idea that more people died in the prison than on the national average, and that anyone was ever tortured there. A few days later, Hans meets Grunwald in the street. Grunwald explains it is hard to find employment after his old career. They are interrupted by a woman seeking the torture museum, but Grunwald tells her no such place exists.



Grunwald warns Hans about having anything to do with the curator. Gunwald thinks perhaps the packages are coming from the curator as a way to entice Hans to do the video. The curator arrives the next morning to give Hans his old photo with his wife.

That night, Hans discovers his daughter, Nina, leaving a package on behalf of herself and Gitta. Nina is horrified that her father worked at Hohenschonhausen, and points out how a pair of gloves given to her as a child actually came from a little girl who was imprisoned, and that prisoners were delivered in vans disguised as milk trucks. Hans insists he had nothing to do with those things, but his daughter doesn't want to hear it. In the newest package are the gloves and the pen of a dissident writer given to Nina as a child.

Hans prepares to make his video by purchasing eyeglasses with a mini camera built in, and new, stylish clothes. He has a tour group bus driver watch Prinz for 55 minutes while he joins a tour of the prison given by Berta, a former inmate. Hans takes every opportunity to challenge her story and description of things. For example, what Berta describes as an isolation room, Hans reveals to be a mop closet. Berta points out her own prison cell. Hans goes in, saying it is roomy. Berta locks him in, asking him if it still feels roomy. Hans says she has made her point. Berta later apologizes for having done so. Berta encourages Hans to go home if, as Hans insists, the past is a book better left closed.

Hans continues to counter Berta's description of things. Berta reveals she remembers the Hans, and wants to know if Hans remembers her. Hans does not at first, only later recalling Berta had a butterfly ring taken from her. Hans remembers it was given to the daughter of a coworker for good marks in school. Hans confronts Berta, telling her and the tour group he will prove that no torture ever occurred in the prison. He steps into an old cell where prisoners were doused in cold, rusty water. He tells her he will call out when the level of the water rises to the point where it constitutes torture. Meanwhile, he thinks about how Berta said she survived prison by letting her mind go elsewhere. Hans longs for his mind to go to such a place. For him, this place is East Germany.

Analysis

In "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine," the reader is introduced to Hans, the former administrative head of Hohenschonhausen Prison in Berlin. Here, the theme of life is readily apparent in two principal ways. First, Hans never expected as a child to become the head of a prison; and second, once the head of a prison, never expected to see East Germany reunited with the West and the Cold War end in his lifetime. This twist in events in Hans's life are further complicated by the transformation of the prison as a museum depicting the horrors that went on within its walls and the horrors of totalitarianism in general.

Hans's unanticipated recognition of what is now going on at the museum, as well as the fall of East Germany, lead him to a kind of strange and detached existence. His inability to move beyond the past—and the Cold War and his role as head of



Hohenschonhausen is now indeed the past—is physically manifested in his desire to remain living in the same house he lived in while warden of the prison. His wife and daughter have left Hans in large part over his role at the prison now that many truths about the totalitarian regime of East Germany have come to light.

Hans himself presents something of a morally ambiguous character. While Hans himself had no direct hand in the atrocities carried out by the regime, he was still a part of things. He is and is not morally responsible for what occurred at the prison given his administrative oversight and lack of direct participation. It is clear that some of what he says can be verified—noting what was a janitorial closet, or crimes of Wexler, for example—but that in other circumstances, Hans may have either been willfully ignorant or misled about what transpired, such as the torture endured in the hospital or in the deepest reaches of the prison. This can be seen in Nina's confrontation with her father about prisoners being delivered in milk trucks and being denied their freedom under a system of which Hans was a factor.

While Hans has no regrets about his tenure at Hohenschonhausen, he does regret that his wife has left him, and that his daughter has turned against him. Their repulsion at Hans's moral culpability is understandable, but still heartbreaking for Hans. Hans is simply unable to understand why they would have turned against him because he genuinely believes he has no moral culpability for anything that transpired at the prison, again either out of willful ignorance or genuine unknowing. Freedom following the Cold War has been liberating for countless millions, but has corrupted Hans's purpose in life, symbolized by the rusted water that covers him at the end of the story. Hans does not dream of freedom or the future, but of the past—of East Germany.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Hans have such a difficult time with life in post-Cold War Germany? Has he tried to adapt to life in the new world? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Hans is either willfully ignorant or genuinely unaware of what occurred at Hohenschonhausen under his watch? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe that Hans is morally and/or legally responsible for everything that occurred in Hohenschonhausen under his wardenship? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

apparatus, seditious, totalitarianism, tyranny, remanded, incarceration, bemoaned



Dark Meadow

Summary

In "Dark Meadow," the narrator, an IT repairman, posts an article online about how a tracking beacon has been implanted into child pornography files, and how each time the files are copied, the beacon sends a signal. The narrator prefers to work in his North Hollywood garden at night. The gardens are based on things he read about in National Geographic. He often sees a woman named Rhonza he calls the Tiger's Mom headed home from band gigs, where she discovers and writes about new music online. Her older daughter is a sixth grader who cares for her younger sister. The older daughter wears a Tiger mascot costume for school. The narrator says he has never hurt anyone in his life, but he is the one who is wounded in this story.

The narrator says he went to do a repair job in Van Nuys for \$300. The man requesting the repair job says his friend recommended the narrator. The narrator begins the repair, running a search for child porn images. The images pop up, which the man says were already on the computer when he bought it, but that he was meaning to get rid of. The narrator says the little girl in the porn is now grown and has a blanket judgment against anyone in possession of the images, and her uncle who abused and recorded the girl is now serving 35 years in prison. The narrator discovers a picture of a girl's clothed top half, and she looks terrified. It is something the narrator has not seen before, so he copies. He tells the man to destroy the drives and not copy the pictures, because they send out pings to the authorities.

The narrator returns home, turned on the by image of the little girl. It sickens him and reminds him of when he was raped as a child by the Skipper of his Sea Scout troop. The next day, Officer Jaime Hernandez stops by to visit on advice from the recently-retired Sergeant Rengsdorff. Rhonza walks by, and says that she figured the narrator was the peeping tom in the neighborhood. Inside, Hernandez comments on the lifetime subscription the narrator has to National Geographic, which the narrator writes off as a Sea Scout consolation prize. Hernandez reveals he wants to know about tracking images, and that Rengsdorff said the narrator was the guy to talk to. The narrator explains the process.

Hernandez references an online article written by someone who signed his name "Dark Meadow." Hernandez doesn't understand whether the writer is trying to alert pedophiles or alert the authorities to a way to catch them. Hernandez says to him, there is no difference between the person taking the pictures and the person looking at the pictures. Hernandez says he doesn't think the narrator is a bad guy, but that the narrator should be in contact with the code that could track all the child porn images. On Saturday, the Tiger and her little sister have a yard sale. The narrator says hello to them. They explain their mother is on tour with a band and don't know when she'll be back. The narrator buys a painting of a Bermuda sloop for \$300.



While he is outside reading a National Geographic that night, the Tiger and her sister tell the narrator say a man has looked in their window. The narrator checks things out, and hangs towels over their windows. The narrator also discovers there is no food in the house, so he buys some for the girls. He then makes sure they lock the door as he leaves. He then texts Officer Hernandez the code. The next day, the narrator takes on work in an old Sun Valley dog kennel for someone identifying himself as Dodger6636. Dodger gives the narrator a thumb drive loaded with child porn as payment. Dodger then brings the narrator in to see Bert, sitting before several computers. Dodger explains that the narrator is to make sure their servers are clean. Bert and Dodger produce child pornography. Bert is editing a video of a young girl being exploited when the young girl herself walks into the room with cereal. The narrator is horrified. He drops the thumb drive, rushes home, and destroys his computer. The narrator realizes he is a bad guy. He drives up into Topanga Canyon to the place where the Skipper hung himself.

That night, the Tiger and her sister ask to spend the night because the man has come back. They sleep under the covers on his bed while he sleeps on top of the covers. He asks the Tiger about the worst thing she's ever done, and she mentions how girls on the cheerleading team trade pictures of boys. He then goes out into his backyard and masturbates. He knows he is screwed up from his own experiences as a child, and nothing can be done for him.

Analysis

In what is the most morally-challenging story in the collection, the readers are presented with a narrator who vacillates between being a victim and a criminal, between being morally helpless and morally reprehensible. The narrator, raped as a child, has now grown into a man who both helps and targets child porn users and makers and is sexually turned on by young girls. The narrator explains that the experiences of children involved in such disgusting and traumatic circumstances cannot ever truly be put away or dealt with. The narrator also explains early in the story that he has hurt no one, and that bad things only happen to him, but this is untrue and a morally indefensible position to take. With every step he takes to help pedophiles, he is ultimately harming the children who are taken advantage of.

The life the narrator leads is not what he would have ever expected. As a child, the narrator did not expect to be raped by his scoutmaster on a Sea Scout outing. Likewise, he did not anticipate becoming so morally obtuse or contracting sexual attraction to young children. Nevertheless, he recognizes this and is repulsed by this in some situations. This is apparent in his fleeing of the old dog kennel when the girl whom he has just watched being exploited on film walks into the room. However, the narrator's sickness is recognized and nearly acted upon by the narrator as he gets into bed with the two girls next door. There is absolutely no need for the narrator to even sleep in the same room as them, let alone the same bed, and to ask them about the worst things they ever done. Such is the psychologically-scarred and twisted mindset the narrator now has.



The narrator contends this is because of the past he has suffered. His own innocence—indeed, his freedom as a child—was taken away when he was raped by a grown man. In a large sense, the freedom that the narrator lost through being raped has adversely affected him into the present. But now the narrator himself threatens the freedom and innocence of girls like the one he experienced in the dog kennel by assisting child porn viewers and makers in their behavior. At the very least, the narrator did a good thing by sending the code to Hernandez that would track all child porn users.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator give Hernandez the tracking code despite having helped so many pedophiles escape justice?

Discussion Question 2

Why, despite his own experiences as a child, does the narrator help child porn users and viewers to escape justice? Should the narrator be held to account for this? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe the narrator of this short story is morally reprehensible or morally ambiguous? Explain.

Vocabulary

ironies, involuntarily, victimized, loathsome, unfathomable, diagnostic



Fortune Smiles

Summary

In the final story, "Fortune Smiles," every Friday, DJ and Sun-ho meet for lunch. DJ lives in a male dormitory in the Gwanak District in Seoul, South Korea. He is transitioning following defection from North Korea. On this Friday, DJ waits for Sun-ho in Lotteria. DJ wonders what sort of force drives South Koreans, because he knows in the North, submission to the dictator is the driving force in life. DJ and Sun-ho, though free of the North are not free. Many defectors become suicidal, alcoholics, or even re-defect. Sun-ho reflects on the girl he left behind, Willow. DJ reflects on all the girls in the South that Sun-ho is trying to sleep with. Sun-ho reveals he has brought car dealer master keys with him from the North and now uses them to borrow cars from wealthy wives in Gangnam. A group of teens in school uniforms snap pictures of the North Koreans, which angers them.

While Sun-ho has had a difficult life in the North, DJ's life has been relatively privileged, doing well so long as he did as he was told by the government. This included selling false hope, fake medicine, and unsafe cars. DJ realizes that, while Sun-ho protected him in North Korea, DJ now needs to protect Sun-ho in South Korea. The following day, they meet at Burger King. Sun-ho orders an extra Whopper to attach to fifty "It's a Boy!" balloons from a hospital that he will release across the DMZ for Willow in North Korea. Sun-ho knows the Whopper will never reach her, but that what matters is that it was sent. Guards try to stop the launching, but are unsuccessful. A group of young men and Sun-ho pick a fight with one another over the way they are dressed and where they are from. DJ intervenes and stops Sun-ho from going further, but gets punched out as a result. When DJ comes to, Sun-ho says they should have lived a thousand years before.

Sometime before, DJ and Sun-ho met with a defector's group at church. Among them was Mina, who had access to exclusive Party locations and privileges. She was forced to learn to play the accordion, a talent for which DJ complimented her and enjoyed. Mina says others think she should give up the accordion because it is a vestige of the North. DJ says she should simply learn new, non-North songs, or write her own. Mina goes on to explain she is looking for her husband, but says she doesn't love him. In the present, Mina joins DJ and Sun-ho as Sun-ho seeks to send a jacket, winning counterfeit lottery tickets, and a map North by balloon. At the DMZ, they come across a humanitarian group preparing to send leaflets North. One of the group, Seo, says that they are sending the truth North while all Sun-ho is doing is sending a jacket and a long shot at good fortune. Sun-ho thinks his delivery will do more good. He asks Seo where Seo gets the big balloons they are using.

A few nights later, DJ receives a call from Assistant Inspector Kang at Samseong Station. Sun-ho has been picked up for entering traffic while drunk. DJ goes to pick him up, during which time Sun-ho asks DJ to meet him to Gangnam the following day with



Mina and her accordion. Sun-ho also announces he is spending the night in jail. DJ says it feels like he is abandoning Sun-ho. Sun-ho thinks DJ says it like it's a bad thing. The next day, DJ and Mina learn that Sun-ho has been living in a closet in an upscale building. He brings them to the roof where he has fastened numerous giant balloons to a plastic lawn chair to return to the North and to Willow. DJ doesn't want Sun-ho to go. Sun-ho says he'll always be what DJ had in the North, and DJ will always be what he had in the South. Sun-ho then flies away and out of sight. DJ asks Mina if she ever feels like returning to the North. Mina says she feels like she just got to the South. DJ says he feels the same way.

Analysis

In the final story in the collection, the themes of Life and Freedom intertwine in important ways. Having grown up in North Korea, DJ and Sun-ho never believed they would leave North Korea, let alone defect to the South. They have grown up under a brutal totalitarian regime which has denied them even simple freedoms, always telling them what to do and how to do it, from selling fake medicine to unsafe cars. In the South, DJ and Sun-ho struggle to adapt to freedom, to no one hanging over their shoulder and forcing them to do anything. Indeed, DJ wonders at one point what it is that motivates people in the South in their lives if not the government.

As the story unfolds, DJ and Sun-ho struggle not only to adapt to life in the South, but to forget their past in the North. The past has a powerful hold on them not only because they have spent so much of their lives in the North, but because they have left many things behind as well. For Sun-ho, this is a woman in the form of Willow. Sun-ho's symbolic mailing of gifts by balloon across the DMZ is representative of the true love he has for Willow, while his flings with South Korean women are byproducts of his unhappiness.

Indeed, the past has such a powerful hold over Sun-ho (and many others as well), that he decides to redefect. He does this in a dangerous manner: by attempting the trip in a lawn chair tethered to balloons. Sun-ho's fate is ultimately unknown. However, the past has a powerful hold on DJ and Mina as well. The two of them do not want to return to the past for any reason, and so decide they will remain in the South despite the future being uncertain. The departure of Sun-ho is especially difficult for DJ because Sun-ho has essentially become an older brother to him. Losing Sun-ho is like losing family.

Discussion Question 1

At one point, DJ wonders what motivates the free people of South Korea in their lives. If you had to explain this to him, how would you do so?



Discussion Question 2

Why do DJ and Sun-ho have such a difficult time adjusting to life in South Korea, especially in lieu of life in North Korea?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the past have such a hold on Sun-ho? Why does Sun-ho ultimately decide to return to North Korea? Why does DJ decide to remain in South Korea?

Vocabulary

melancholy, bewildering, defection, obsolete, bristled



Characters

Narrator of "Nirvana"

The narrator of "Nirvana" is an IT programmer who has taken time off from work to care for his temporarily paralyzed wife, Charlotte. During this time, he has programmed an iProjector to create an interactive hologram of the recently-assassinated President. The narrator, never named, worries that his wife may commit suicide. To prevent this, he programs the projector to broadcast a hologram of Kurt Cobain since his wife loves Nirvana. He is thrilled to see that his wife encourages the projection of Cobain not to commit suicide because it will hurt too many people.

Charlotte

Charlotte is the wife of the narrator in "Nirvana." Temporarily paralyzed following a horrible flu, Charlotte has become depressed and despondent. She passes much of her time by listening to Nirvana, her favorite band. She is grateful for the care that her husband gives to her but worries that she is a burden. She is delighted when he programs a holographic projection of Kurt Cobain and encourages Cobain not to commit suicide because it will hurt too many people. Without realizing it, Charlotte steels herself against committing suicide as well.

Nonc

Randall "Nonc" Richard is the main character of "Hurricanes Anonymous." A divorced UPS deliveryman, Nonc unhesitatingly decides to take care of his son, Geronimo, when his ex-wife leaves Geronimo in his delivery truck one day. Nonc is deeply troubled not only by his ex-wife's disappearance, but by the fact that his father—who has always taken material advantage of Nonc, including stealing Nonc's car—is now dying of cancer in Los Angeles. Nonc ultimately decides to call and make peace with his father. Nonc is glad that his girlfriend, Relle, likes Geronimo, and agrees to begin a new life with her and his son. This will begin with traveling to California to see his father.

Relle

Cherelle, who goes by "Relle," is the girlfriend of Nonc in "Hurricanes Anonymous." She is fiercely defensive of Nonc, is incredibly loyal, and very loving toward Geronimo. She urges Nonc to begin a new life with her, including switching up jobs. She believes they can begin a hunting-tourism business, and agrees to go with Nonc to California to see about his father as they endeavor to start anew.



Narrator of "Interesting Facts"

The never-named narrator of "Interesting Facts" is a 45 year old woman who has survived breast cancer and is having a difficult time readjusting to daily life following such a harrowing time. She constantly compares her lack of breasts to the breasts of every woman she comes across and has a difficult time believing that her husband could still be sexually and romantically attracted to her. The narrator recognizes that she has drifted too far away from her family and resolves to reconnect with her husband and her two children.

Hans

Hans is the former warden of Hohenschonhausen Prison in the short story "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine." Hans still lives down the street from Hohenschonhausen, which has been turned into a museum since the end of the Cold War, designed to depict the horrors of the prison and totalitarianism in general. Hans is annoyed by this, because he does not believe any such horrors occurred under his watch during his tenure. Hans himself never participated in any such torture or brutality, and so he adamantly defends his record against Berta and the curator of the museum. He must also defend himself against his ex-wife who has left him and his daughter who does not want to see him, for they are having a difficult time reconciling his past. Hans longs for the days of East Germany when his life was in order and had a purpose.

Berta

Berta is a former inmate of Hohenschonhausen Prison and now a tour guide at Hohenschonhausen, which has been converted into a museum. Berta leads tours and points out places where torture and atrocities occurred. Hans joins her on one such tour, and the two consistently present two sides of the story, never truly agreeing on anything. Berta alternates between feelings of hatred and forgiveness toward Hans, never truly settling on either.

Narrator of "Dark Meadow"

The narrator of "Dark Meadow" is an IT repairman who was raped as a young boy on a Sea Scout trip by his scoutmaster. The narrator grows up psychologically and emotionally scarred and warped, coming to be sexually attracted to very young girls in his adulthood. The narrator is aware of this attraction, and is repulsed by it but thinks there is nothing he can do about it. As an IT repairman, he helps to protect child porn viewers, dealers, and makers by cleaning their tracks, but also encodes their files with pings that can be used to track them down. The narrator gives up the code to the police so that these individuals may face criminal justice.

DJ

DJ is a North Korean defector who has been living in South Korea for some time, struggling to adjust to freedom and a free world. He is happy that he at least has Sun-ho with him, whom he has come to consider a brother. DJ also begins to grow close to Mina, a woman who defected from the North. Both DJ and Mina are stunned to discover that Sun-ho will be traveling back to the North because he do desperately misses Willow, the woman he loves.

Sun-ho

Sun-ho is a North Korean defector who has been living in South Korea for some time, struggling to adjust not only to the freedom of the South, but a life without Willow nearby. Sun-ho tries to distract himself by sleeping with wealthy South Korean women in Gangnam, but this does not help. He decides to return to North Korea by strapping massive, helium-filled balloons to a lawn chair and traveling through the air. His ultimate fate is unknown.



Symbols and Symbolism

iProjector

An iProjector is a machine that projects images, films, and holograms as programmed. The narrator in “Nirvana” has an iProjector which he uses to construct an interactive digital version of the recently assassinated President. The narrator later uses the iProjector to create a hologram of Kurt Cobain to convince his wife not to commit suicide.

Kurt Cobain hologram

A Kurt Cobain hologram is programmed by the narrator and projected using an iProjector in the story “Nirvana.” The Kurt Cobain hologram is interactive, assumes all of his real-life mannerisms, and appropriates written, spoken, and sung words for use in conversation with the viewer. The narrator programs the Cobain hologram for his wife so that she may speak to him, and he may convince her not to commit suicide. This is accomplished when the wife tells Kurt he should not commit suicide because it would hurt too many people, including her. Without realizing it, Charlotte has steeled herself against suicide.

Roses

Roses are grown by Charlotte in her garden behind her house in “Nirvana.” While she is ill, her husband lovingly tends to the roses on her behalf. The roses that the narrator tends to are not only symbolic of the love that he shares with Charlotte, but are also symbolic of the caring nature of the narrator in general.

DIAD

A DIAD is carried and used by Nonc in his work as a UPS deliveryman in “Hurricanes Anonymous.” The DIAD features an electronic pad for customers to sign for their packages, Wi-Fi capabilities, GPS capabilities, cellular capabilities, and Bluetooth capabilities. When Nonc travels to California to handle his father’s death, he leaves the DIAD behind with his son so that he may always know where his son is.

Photograph of Hans and Gitta

A photograph of Hans and Gitta is kept by Hans while serving as warden of Hohenschonhausen Prison as a reminder of what waits for him at home each night in “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine.” The photograph is lost following the fall of the East German order, and is discovered and restored by the museum. Hans asks for the



return of the photo, but is told it now belongs to the people of the country, an irony given that, had the situation been reversed some years before, Hans would have been told the photo belonged to the State. The photograph is ultimately returned to Hans on an extended loan.

Rusty water

Rusty water is collected in the deepest levels of Hohenschonhausen Prison, and used to deluge prisoners to force them to confess or as punishment in “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine.” Hans does not consider this torture, while Berta does. Hans voluntarily undergoes the process of being deluged with rusty water to prove it is not torture, during which time he wishes it was still the era of East German rule. Freedom following the Cold War has been liberating for countless millions, but has corrupted Hans’s purpose in life, symbolized by the rusted water that covers him at the end of the story.

Encoding

The narrator in “Dark Meadow” encodes all of the child porn images he discovers in his work so that each time they are accessed, saved, traded, shared, or used, they emit a ping by which the user or dealer can be tracked. The narrator ultimately gives the police this code so that they may track the criminals in the child porn black market. However, despite this, the narrator helps child porn users, dealers, and producers escape justice by cleaning their trails and telling them how to cover themselves.

Balloons

Balloons are used by Sun-ho in the novel to symbolically send gifts to Willow across the DMZ between North Korea and South Korea in “Fortune Smiles.” Balloons are also used by Sun-ho to send gifts, such as a jacket, to peasants living in North Korea. At the end of the story, Sun-ho secures dozens of large, helium-filled balloons to a lawn chair which he then uses to fly himself back toward North Korea, to the woman that he loves. His ultimate fate is unknown.

Whopper

A Whopper is a kind of hamburger sold at Burger King franchises in “Fortune Smiles.” Sun-ho purchases a Whopper to symbolically send to Willow by balloon across the DMZ to North Korea from South Korea. Sun-ho knows the Whopper will never reach Willow, but is doing it as a gesture of love. This underscores just how deeply Sun-ho misses Willow.

Lawn chair

A lawn chair is secured to several large helium-filled balloons by Sun-ho at the end of the short story "Fortune Smiles." Desperately missing Willow, Sun-ho decides to return to North Korea. Knowing the difficulty in trying to cross the border legally, Sun-ho decides to return by way of the lawn chair. He is last seen floating up through the clouds in the lawn chair at the end of the story.



Settings

San Francisco

San Francisco is a coastal city in Northern California, and is the main setting of the short story "Interesting Facts." San Francisco is home to the narrator and her family and is where she and her husband work as writers. San Francisco is noted for the Golden Gate Bridge, and for Golden Gate Park, where the narrator spends much of her time doing her best to notice as much as she can about the world, grateful that she has survived cancer. Much of the beauty in San Francisco provides a contrast to the sadness and horror that the narrator has experienced, and represents a sense of normality and beauty the narrator seeks to return to.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is a city in California, notable for playing host to Hollywood. It factors heavily into the stories "Hurricanes Anonymous" and "Dark Meadow." Nonc's father steals Nonc's car so that he can drive out to Los Angeles to live there. Nonc later learns his father is dying of cancer in LA. In "Dark Meadow," the narrator lives and works in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is home to a massive black market for child pornography, and is where the narrator both hinders and helps law enforcement in the arrest and prosecution of these criminals.

Berlin

Berlin is the capital city of Germany, and factors into the story "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine." Berlin was once divided between East and West Berlin, as the Communist sphere of influence included East Berlin and East Germany during the Cold War. Berlin itself was divided by a massive wall to keep the free world out and to keep people from escaping into the free world. Hans was a warden at Hohenschoonhausen Prison in Berlin during the Cold War. He remains living there through the present day.

North Korea and South Korea

North Korea and South Korea are two halves of a country that was once whole and devolved into civil war as a brutal communist regime tried to conquer the free South. The United States intervened to preserve a free and independent South Korea, which remains to the present day. Thousands of people defect from North Korea to South Korea, including DJ and Sun-ho in the story "Fortune Smiles." While DJ endeavors to live in the South, Sun-ho, despite the horrors of the dictator-ruled North, cannot forget the love of his life, Willow, and so re-defects to North Korea at the end of the story.

New Orleans

New Orleans is a port city in Louisiana, and is home to Nonc, his son, his ex-wife, and his girlfriend in "Hurricanes Anonymous." The story takes place in 2005, mere days after Hurricane Katrina has devastated the city and the surrounding area. Nonc works in New Orleans as a deliveryman for UPS. It is in New Orleans that Nonc becomes the primary caregiver for his son and makes peace with his father by phone. It is also in New Orleans that Nonc has decided to begin a new life with his girlfriend, Relle, beginning by leaving New Orleans for a brief time to visit his father in California before his father dies, and to deal with funerary arrangements.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the short story collection “Fortune Smiles” by Adam Johnson. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently throughout Johnson’s collection of stories, and family affects the plot of the stories in various ways.

In “Nirvana,” family means everything to the narrator, who has no real family beyond his wife, Charlotte. In order to care for her, he has taken a leave of absence from work, and tends not only to Charlotte, but to her roses in the garden. The roses that the narrator tends to are symbolic of the love that he shares with Charlotte, and are symbolic of the caring nature of the narrator in general. The narrator longs to have children with Charlotte, and worries she will commit suicide. He manages to prevent this by eliciting her own reaction to Kurt Cobain’s suicide.

In “Interesting Facts,” the narrator feels detached from her family after surviving breast cancer, and knows she must reestablish a relationship with them. Indeed, the narrator notes that her husband has remained loyal, faithful, and loving to her despite everything she has been through and what she now looks like without breasts. In “Hurricanes Anonymous,” Nonc comes to care for his son while reestablishing good relations with his own father just as his father is dying of cancer. This is difficult for Nonc to do with respect to his father, since his father always put his family last and stole Nonc’s car to make it to Los Angeles. For his son, Nonc doesn’t hesitate even an instant before deciding to take care of him. Nonc only worries about whether he will be a good enough father.

In “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine,” Hans is dealing with the unhappiness that came not only with the end of the Cold War, but with his wife and daughter abandoning him after learning of his role at the prison where he worked years before. Hans is lonely and depressed without his family, coming to rely on a small dog named Prinz for company and comfort. Hans has no one else, and even his real family wants nothing to do with him at least for the time being. This further alienates him from the world, and makes him long for the era of East Germany once more. In “Dark Meadow,” the narrator has been so emotionally and psychologically scarred from being abused as a child that it is likely he will never be able to have a family of his own. In “Fortune Smiles,” DJ and Sun-ho, though not blood-related, become like brothers as they escape from North Korea and try to survive in the South. However, the freedom in the South and the sense of family that DJ offers cannot prevent Sun-ho from returning north. This devastates DJ.



Life

Life is an important theme in the short story collection “Fortune Smiles” by Adam Johnson. Life never turns out the way people expect it. Sometimes it is better, sometimes it is worse. Life is full of changes as well, many of which cannot be avoided.

In “Nirvana,” life has not turned out the way the narrator or his wife would have expected. Instead of trying to have children, the narrator is trying to find a way to properly care for his now temporarily-paralyzed wife and care for her. Charlotte herself never expected to be paralyzed and is utterly depressed and unhappy. There is very little she can do other than listen to music, watch TV, or look out the window. In “Interesting Facts,” the narrator never expected to have her life interrupted by a fight with breast cancer. Though she has survived, she struggles to readjust to daily life, including reconnecting with her family. Likewise, the narrator never expected her husband to remain faithful to her.

In “Hurricanes Anonymous,” Nonc never expected that he would become the primary caregiver for his son, Geronimo, after Nonc’s ex-wife fell in with the wrong people. Nonc unhesitatingly takes on the role as primary caregiver, while at the same time being forced to deal with his own relationship with his father. It was something he never expected would happen—that his father would turn out to be a bad guy, or that he would have to be the one to make peace. In “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine,” Hans never expected East Germany to be reunited with West Germany, the Cold War to end, or his own tenure at Hohenschonhausen Prison as warden to end. Additionally, he never expected to become the source of such condemnation, or the reason for his wife and daughter to abandon him, for doing the job he was given to do.

In “Dark Meadow,” the narrator never expected to be raped and sexually abused as a child by his scout master, and likewise never expected to become a fully-grown man both sexually attracted to, and repulsed by his sexual attraction to, little girls. The narrator never expected to be psychologically and emotionally scarred for the rest of his life, either. In “Fortune Smiles,” DJ and Sun-ho never expected that they would leave North Korea, let alone defect to South Korea. Likewise, in South Korea, DJ never imagined that Sun-ho would decide to return to North Korea after risking his life to get out.

The Past

The Past is an important theme in the short story collection “Fortune Smiles” by Adam Johnson. Thematically, the past (incidents, events, situations, and circumstances in a person’s history) can largely affect the present. The past has tremendous bearing on many of Johnson’s short stories in various ways.

In “Nirvana,” the flu that Charlotte contracted in the past transmogrified into a temporary paralysis that has left her in pain and in depression. Charlotte escapes in Nirvana’s music. Using a holographic image of Kurt Cobain, the narrator is able to convince



Charlotte that suicide is not the answer. Charlotte looks at how badly Cobain's suicide affected people in the past, and affects her now in the present. In "Hurricanes Anonymous," Nonc's own past with his father has largely wrecked his life in the present. His father has always put himself over his family, and had even stolen Nonc's car to get to Los Angeles, leaving Nonc with almost nothing. Nonc is deeply hurt by this, but understands what awaits his father—death—is nothing to be glad about. Nonc overcomes the past by making peace with his father in the present so that both may reconnect in what little time they have left, and so that both may live out their lives knowing they ultimately did the right thing.

In "Interesting Facts," the narrator is emotionally and physically scarred by her successful battle with breast cancer. Though she has survived, she has lost both of her breasts. She feels unattractive and undesirable in addition to feeling as if she has drifted too far away from her family. She decides that she must reconnect with her husband and her family in the present. In "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine," Hans reflects sadly on the past when he was a warden at Hohenschoenhausen Prison, not in that he regrets the past, but wants to relive it. Hans wishes to relive the past when he had a purpose and when his family was still with him.

In "Dark Meadows," the narrator's past has an immense bearing on his presence. As a child, the narrator was hideously raped, which has emotionally and psychologically warped and scarred him in the present. The narrator himself has grown into a man sexually attracted to little girls, something which he acknowledges repulses him. His own life has been irrevocably altered by his childhood rapist. In "Fortune Smiles," DJ and Sun-ho have fled North Korea for the safety of the South. There, they struggle to adapt to their new lives—DJ in spite of the past in the North, and Sun-ho failingly because of it. Sun-ho is in love with a woman named Willow from his past that ultimately becomes too great a burden on him, causing him to return to the North.

Freedom

Freedom is an important theme in the short story collection "Fortune Smiles" by Adam Johnson. Freedom factors heavily into the short stories "Fortune Smiles" and "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine," but also has subtle importance in "Hurricanes Anonymous," "Dark Meadow," and "Interesting Facts." Freedom becomes essential for the characters involved in these stories.

In "George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine," Berta and Hans are on opposite sides of freedom. Hans is a prison warden while Berta is a former inmate. Both recall different sides of the same story as a result. Hans is convinced anyone who was imprisoned deserved it, and that no one was tortured or wrongfully denied freedom. Berta is convinced he prisons were full of innocent people who were tortured routinely, while the prison itself was symptomatic of the barbaric Communist East German regime that ruled over East Germany nearly 20 years before. Berta is now free to lead tours in the prison that once housed her, while Hans remains free to dispute the museum's intent to demonstrate the horrors of totalitarianism and torture.



In “Fortune Smiles,” DJ and Sun-ho are having difficulty adjusting to life in the freedom of South Korea after escaping the dictatorship of North Korea. DJ at one point wonders what motivates the people of the South in their everyday lives without the government telling them what to do, where to go, and who to be. In North Korea, the government did all this to DJ and Sun-ho from the cradle to the grave. Now that they must rely on themselves, a responsibility that comes hand-in-hand with freedom, DJ has second thoughts because this must be done in conjunction with losing Willow. This becomes too much for Sun-ho to live without Willow, so Sun-ho decides to return to North Korea.

In “Dark Meadow,” the narrator’s innocence, freedom as a child, and future freedom as an adult are stolen when the narrator is raped. The narrator has no choice in the matter when he is raped, and his future is irrevocably scarred by the rape. In “Interesting Facts,” the narrator’s husband has the freedom to leave and abandon the narrator, but he chooses not to. He remains loyal to his wife. In “Hurricanes Anonymous,” the narrator’s father uses his freedom at the expense of his family, putting himself ahead of them. Years later, the narrator uses his freedom to decide to make peace with his father.

Morality

Morality is an important theme in the short story collection “Fortune Smiles” by Adam Johnson. Morality—what is ethically right or ethically wrong—is essential to the plots of “Hurricanes Anonymous,” “Dark Meadow,” and “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine.” It is also of subtle importance to “Nirvana,” “Interesting Facts,” and “Fortune Smiles.” Morality is particularly important to the characters in these stories, and the choices that they make.

In “Dark Meadow,” arguably the most morally-challenging story in the collection, the narrator, himself a childhood rape victim, goes on to not only be sexually attracted to little girls, but to assist child pornographers and child porn viewers erase their tracks to avoid criminal justice. The narrator does make morally responsible choices, such as handing over the code to track down child porn uses, dealers, and makers, but makes morally reprehensible choices as well, such as getting into bed with two little girls and asking them about the worst things they have ever done.

In “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine,” Hans has no moral guilt or concern for his role as a warden at Hohenschohausen Prison. He is either willfully ignorant or genuinely unaware of things that may or may not have occurred under his watch—the reader is left without truly knowing whether Hans or Berta is correct—but still has moral culpability for being part of the East German Communist regime, no matter how small. Yet Hans genuinely divests himself of any moral responsibility for what went on at the prison, vacillating between claiming to be only involved in administration to defending the record of the prison as a whole.

In “Nirvana,” the narrator does not want his wife to commit suicide. This is not merely for moral reasons, but for reasons of love as well. Indeed, the narrator’s decision to devote himself to caring for his wife is a very morally right thing to do. In “Hurricanes



Anonymous,” Nonc take the moral high road by choosing to make peace with his father even though his father was in the wrong. This assures both men will have peace in their lives moving forward. In “Fortune Smiles,” Sun-ho makes the morally symbolic gesture of sending food and clothing over to North Korea by balloon. Some of the deliveries are intended symbolically for Willow, while others are for the common plights of the people living under the dictator.

Styles

Point of View

Adam Johnson tells the short stories in his collection “Fortune Smiles” in the first and third-person narrative depending on the story. The stories “Nirvana,” “Interesting Facts,” “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine,” and “Dark Meadow” are told in the first-person limited-omniscient narrative mode. The stories “Hurricanes Anonymous” and “Fortune Smiles” are told in the third-person limited-omniscient perspective. The first-person perspective allows the reader a very intimate, very personal understanding of the characters in those respective stories, including Hans, the former prison warden; the narrator of “Dark Meadow,” a victim of sexual abuse as a child who has grown up to be sexually attracted to little girls; the breast-cancer survivor in “Interesting Facts”; and the narrator of “Nirvana,” who struggles to avert his wife committing suicide. These stories are the most morally and personally challenging of the collection, so the first-person perspective puts the reader in the mind of the characters directly. Additionally, the limited-omniscient aspect of the stories adds a sense of realism to them, as the reader only knows as much as the characters do in the stories, and only learn things as the characters in the stories learn them.

Language and Meaning

Adam Johnson tells the short stories in his collection “Fortune Smiles” in language that is simple, casual, and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, each of the short stories are set between 2005 and the present day. The language used by people in this period is simple, casual, and straightforward. The same kind of language used in the short stories adds a sense of realism and authenticity to the stories themselves, and make the characters and their situations more believable. Secondly, the language of the time at which Johnson is writing (the 2010s) is reflected in his work. Johnson employs the language commonly used in the era in which he is writing.

Structure

Adam Johnson’s collection “Fortune Smiles” comprises six short stories. Each story encompassed a completely contained plot independent of the plots of the other stories. No story is directly connected to or dependent on any of the others. The stories do, however, share many common themes such as morality and life. The stories alternate in narrative mode, between first and third person. The lengths of the stories themselves vary. “Nirvana,” “Interesting Facts,” and “Dark Meadow” are the shortest, coming in around 40 pages each, while “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine” is the longest, coming in at 65 pages. The eponymous short story “Fortune Smiles” rounds out the collection as the last story.



Quotes

The paralysis is quite temporary, though good luck trying to convince Charlotte of that.
-- Narrator (Nirvana paragraph 2)

Importance: In “Nirvana”, the narrator sums up his wife’s situation succinctly. He knows his wife doesn’t believe her paralysis is only temporary, and he is worried she may try to commit suicide. This becomes a quest for the narrator through the story, to find a way to avert any potential suicide. He ultimately does this through a projection of Kurt Cobain.

I wonder if the first lady was the one to turn off the machine.
-- Narrator (Nirvana paragraph 51)

Importance: Contemplating life, death, love, and marriage, the narrator wonders about the assassinated president and his marriage. He wonders if the First Lady was the one who decided to take the president off life support, and wonders whether he might be able to do the same if he was in that situation with Charlotte. The narrator knows Charlotte will soon be back to normal, so his desire is to ensure that Charlotte doesn’t pull the plug on herself.

Nonc’s dad has had cancer before, so the diagnosis isn’t exactly news. There’s something right about it, though. A man spends his life ‘not expected’—isn’t that how it should end?”
-- Narrator (Hurricane Anonymous paragraph 15)

Importance: Nonc, though he has had a difficult time with his father, still feels badly about his father’s prognosis. When he reflects on the incomplete text message regarding his father’s prognosis, he likens it to a man’s life in general. Life or death, or the thousand events and situations and possibilities in life lead to uncertainty. Nonc’s father is not expected to live much longer, but any man in general may not be expected to marry, have a family, have a decent job, make a mark in the world, and so on.

It’s spooky the way, instead of seeing yourself in the windows of passing houses, your reflection falls into their dark rooms.
-- Narrator (Hurricane Anonymous paragraph 27)

Importance: As the narrator travels through devastated New Orleans, he notes how most of the windows are gone. Instead of seeing his own reflection, he sees darkness. This is symbolic of the way Nonc feels inside, dark and hollow. Reflections have been stripped away by the storm. Appearances and pretenses are gone. The truth inside is now to be seen. Instead of seeing what was previously seen, the truth is now being understood. The narrator forgets past grievances and strips away reflections of pain and anger to make peace with his father.

But I’m just tired. These are the place my mind goes when I’m tired.
-- Narrator (Interesting Facts paragraph 18)



Importance: The narrator here reflects on life, death, and having survived breast cancer. She notices the breasts on all other women now that she no longer has her own, and she wonders why her husband would still be sexually attracted or faithful to her. She knows her husband deftly handles attractive young women who come on to him, and she is grateful for this though she knows she dwells on it too much. This is important in understanding the narrator is doing her best to readjust to everyday life, but is having a difficult time in doing so.

Can you see why it would be hard for me to tell wake from sleep, how the two could feel reversed?

-- Narrator (Interesting Facts paragraph 54)

Importance: While the narrator reflects on perceptions of things, and how things truly are based on her medication and long periods of sleep, the quote here underlies a deeper truth. The waking world and the sleeping world can be exchanged for life with cancer, and life after cancer. The experience is understandably terrible and traumatic for the narrator, so she is having a difficult time living as though she no longer has cancer after knowing during that time she might not survive cancer and live.

The truth is, though, that you don't need to die to know what it's like to be a ghost.

-- Narrator (Interesting Facts paragraph 138)

Importance: The narrator has largely withdrawn into herself due to her ordeal, and now struggles to readjust to everyday life. She feels as if she has become too distant to her family, like a ghost, as a result. She endeavors to reconnect with her husband and her children, knowing she has behaved as though she is dead rather than having survived. Likewise, her distance make her feel as though she is a living ghost, especially to hear how her children and husband will sometimes speak about her as if she is truly not there.

What did any of it mean, now that none of it remains?

-- Hans (George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine paragraph 140)

Importance: Here, Hans reflects on his past life as a prison warden, and life in East Germany. Hans's struggles to make sense of how the present is no longer the same as the past, and he struggles to find meaning in the past because the past is no longer the same in the present. Hans's personal consideration of building a life toward something only to end up with nothing (in his case, no job and no family) may be seen as symbolic of any person in any situation.

You have to understand that I have never hurt anyone in my life and that I am the one who gets wounded in this story.

-- Narrator (Dark Meadow paragraph 14)

Importance: The narrator contends that he has never hurt anyone, but he is the one who has been hurt. The narrator makes a specious and ironic statement here which



underlies the moral corrosion of his character. Although the narrator was raped as a child to no fault of his own, and although the narrator is psychologically and emotionally warped as a result, and even though the narrator gives the police the code used to track child porn dealers and makers, the narrator also helps child porn users and makers cover their tracks. His assertion that he is hurting no one is wrong, because he is helping to prolong and protect a criminal industry geared toward the abuse of children. He is hurting the children who will be victimized in this industry as a result.

What force was driving them?

-- Narrator (Fortune Smiles paragraph 6)

Importance: DJ and Sun-ho are mystified and impressed with the freedom of South Korea. Having grown up under the Dictator Kim-Jong-Un and his son in North Korea, DJ and Sun-ho are used to having the state tell them what to do and who to be. In the South, the state does not tell the people what to do with their lives. This causes DJ to wonder what it is that causes free people to be motivated in their lives. This demonstrates how personal responsibility can be terrifying to someone who has never enjoyed such freedom before.

Even when they got out of Hanawon, they weren't free. Too many defectors had become alcoholic, homeless, suicidal, or, worse, had redefected.

-- Narrator (Fortune Smiles paragraph 28)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains the situation for DJ, Sun-ho, and other defectors. Being free of North Korea doesn't mean a defector is free. Many defectors have a difficult time in the free world, and become suicidal, alcoholic, or even return North because the change is too much for them to bear. DJ knows that he and Sun-ho are not immune to these dangers. As DJ comes to learn, Sun-ho decides to redefect.

But what good was thinking all this when North Korea was a place he'd never see again? It was Seoul he had to wrap his head around.

-- Narrator (Fortune Smiles paragraph 95)

Importance: DJ is constantly absorbed by thoughts of the past, by thoughts of North Korea. He realizes that dwelling on the past is unhealthy when he is trying to adjust to life in a new land with a different culture and sense of self. DJ is determined he will never go back North. Sun-ho, on the other hand, becomes consumed with thoughts of Willow, which ultimately prompts him to return to the North.