God Knows Short Guide

God Knows by Joseph Heller

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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".

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Characters

In a sense, Heller creates one character, King David, who in a virtuoso narrative performance creates a cast of characters, most of whom are one-dimensional. God briefly plays the heavy, then remains silently waiting in the wings for a reentrance. Bathsheba is a lusty wench in Act I and a Jewish mother relendessly pushing her son to power in Act II. Solomon, the epitome of wisdom through the ages, in David's play is "Shlomo," who mindlessly records his father's words on clay tablets. In fact, all of the characters serve primarily to highlight the leading role, which David plays himself— that of chief victim in an unjust universe.

God Knows is David's proof that he has the best story in the Bible. "I've got the poetry and passion, savage violence and the plain raw civilizing grief of human heartbreak," he brags. "Gory deeds? I've got more than enough for every taste. I have suicide, regicide, patricide, homicide, fratricide, infanticide, adultery, incest, hanging, and more decapitations than just Saul's." Add to that list heroic exploits, romance, steamy sex scenes, family problems galore, and an unresolved quarrel with God, and what reader could resist? Through the first-person narration Heller deliberately draws attention to his tale as a fictional construct. It is the creation of a dying king who on his deathbed can do little more than remember and attempt to win love one more time—if not from Saul, God, Absalom, or Bathsheba, then at least from us as his listeners.

There is a disturbing monomaniacal quality to Heller's David. He alienates his audience by constantly building up his reputation at the expense of the reputations of others. For instance, David claims, "I think I may have been the first grown man in the world to fall truly, passionately, sexually, romantically, and sentimentally in love." He sets himself up as archetypal artist—the composer of "Ode to Joy," "Ave Maria," and the Goldberg Variations, superior poet to Milton, Shelley, and even Shakespeare, whom he accuses of having "pilfered' from him in writing Hamlet and Othello. Yet ironically, as David Seed so perceptively notes in The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain, it is David's spiritual status that Heller reduces the most, transforming the ideal hero-king of the Bible into a childish whiner.

Social Concerns/Themes

Two social concerns predominate in God Knows, both of which Joseph Heller has addressed in earlier novels.

One is the breakdown of the family, which Heller first fully treated in Something Happened (1974; see separate entry).

In God Knows we witness incredible violence, antipathy, and back stabbing within the family unit, made all the more complicated by the fact that David's offspring are from different wives. The other concern is the human fixation upon gaining and maintaining power, which Heller exposed in Good as Gold (1979; see separate entry).

In God Knows, politics intrudes in the relationships between Saul and David and between David and his sons over succession to the kingship, and even in David's relationship with Bathsheba as she withholds sex to manipulate him to follow her will in choosing a successor.

God Knows focuses most intently upon the father/son relationship, particularly David's relationship with two embodiments of patriarchal authority, Saul and God. Indeed, David's monologue is a self-justifying attempt to come to terms with his rejections by these paternal figures. As Heller's title indicates, God knows the reasons David has been denied fatherly love; however, David is unable to comprehend why Saul at one moment tenderly addresses him as "son" and the next sends a javelin whizzing by his ear or why God would murder his beloved baby, the offspring of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. Thus David attributes the unhappiness in his life to them: "Had Saul been just a bit more fatherly to me, I would have worshipped him as a god. Had God ever been the least bit paternal, I might have loved him like a father." Summing up his dilemma, he reveals, "I can't bear feeling alone."

Ineffectually, David attempts to substitute self-aggrandizement for fatherly love. Blind to the fact that he has indirectly caused Saul's melancholia and has provoked God's anger by sleeping with Bathsheba and arranging for her husband Uriah's death, David assumes a whimpering, "poor me" attitude: . . . I've got this ongoing, openended Mexican stand-off with God, even though He might now be dead. Whether God is dead or not hardly matters, for we would use Him no differently anyway. He owes me an apology, but God won't budge so I won't budge. I have my faults, God knows, and I may even be among the first to admit them, but to this very day I know in my bones that I'm a much better person than He is.

Yet despite the braggadocio behind such a statement, David clearly yearns for a renewal of God's affection. He suffers from an emptiness that neither fantasies of sleeping one more time with Bathsheba nor his efforts to find warmth in the embrace of Abishag the Shunammite can dispel.

Although his rejections by Saul and God are the primary sources of David's psychological pain, his relationships with his own sons contribute also. He bears with Abigail a Mongoloid son, Chileab, who dies an early death. Ammon rapes his half-sister Tamar. Absalom kills Ammon to avenge his sister and leads an insurrection against his father. As David lies dying, Solomon, in his father's eyes a simpleton, and Adonijah, a petty politician, jockey for the kingship, currying their father's favor only for personal glory. His sons manifest little love towards David.

While the father/son relationship dominates Heller's novel, the husband/wife relationship is also significant.

David's memories center on three of his wives: Abigail, Bathsheba, and Michal.

Each represents a female stereotype— the helpmate, the harlot, and the shrew.

Abigail to David is the perfect woman.

She is beautiful, intelligent, virtuous, and absolutely devoted to attending to her husband's needs. Bathsheba is the temptress, first to adultery and then to murder. It is Bathsheba who initiates David sexually, both verbally and physically, but then with the birth of her son Solomon, whom she insists will be king, abruptly withholds her sexual favors from her husband. And then, there is Michal, the Bible's first Jewish American Princess, with a fixation upon hygiene and an endless list of demands. "Celibacy has few pleasures, I know, but marriage has many pains," bemoans David. These marriages underscore Heller's primary thematic focus upon David's relationship with God, for his marriage to Abigail may be equated with the period of God's favor in David's youth, whereas the manipulations he endures from Bathsheba and Michal after Abigail's death can be linked to God's departure from David.

Heller begins God Knows with an epigraph: "But how can one be warm alone?" That pathetic question links the themes of problematic father/son and husband/wife relationships with a third issue: the difficulties of growing old. Perhaps Heller's major achievement in his fourth novel is his haunting depiction of aging. He elected to portray King David on his deathbed, sexually and politically impotent, his body racked with chills, his spirit disheartened. To sustain him, David has only the virgin Abishag, whose youthful beauty painfully reminds him of all he has lost and evokes bittersweet memories of the supremely confident hero he once was. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—the author recognizes that ultimately we face death alone and that the encounter with one's mortality is often frightening. Heller's protagonist does not go gently into that good night, satisfied with a life fully lived. Quite the contrary, David's final words express a desire for what he no longer has—"I want my God back"—as he looks in a mirror and with horror beholds a sadder face than Saul's, then feels a murderous impulse to hurl a javelin at the vision of himself as "an eager, bright-eyed youth" with a lyre on his lap.

Techniques

In God Knows Heller experiments with a first person monologue, as he did in Something Happened. However, whereas Bob Slocum's tone was flat and passionless, David's voice is ardent and self-defensive. There's a strong oral quality to his narration, as if he is speaking to what he hopes is a sympathetic audience. Certainly his topic of how a youth who embarked "so early on the high road to success" in killing a Philistine giant has been brought to his present "low state of mind" is calculated to tug at the readers' heartstrings, perhaps even influencing them to agree with David's personal application of Nietzschean philosophy: "If character is destiny, the good are damned."

God Knows is very much an old man's book, flavored with the bitterness that loss of physical vitality evokes. And the structure emphasizes that bitterness. The book begins and ends with a present description of a shivering David being tenderly ministered to by the virgin Abishag. The intervening chapters, related primarily in past tense, present in chronological order the major episodes in David's life from the slaying of Goliath to his relinquishment of his throne to Solomon. Heller, however, constantly fragments the chronology to contrast David's past zeal and self-confidence with his present depression, his favor with God with God's abandonment of him. Repetition is an essential structural component, for old men hold strongly to certain memories. Thus David's mind again and again returns to significant scenes, most particularly the beginning of his fiery relationship with Bathsheba as he watched her bathing upon her rooftop.

Undermining the pathos of Heller's portrayal of an elderly King David are the author's comic tricks. One such trick is ribald humor, which is best revealed through Bathsheba's lustful moans during her energetic lovemaking with David and through lamentations of the Philistine women as they recognize the severed and "irreplaceable" phallus of Urgat, whom David has slain. Another comic device is Heller's use of different levels of diction. For example, at times David speaks with romantic eloquence that Heller borrowed from "Song of Solomon": "She feedeth among the lilies. . .

My beloved is mine, and I am hers." At other times he speaks in a colloquial modern idiom: "God and I had a pretty good relationship until he killed the kid; after that I kept my distance." At still other points in the narrative David speaks Yiddish, as in the oft-quoted passage: Some Promised Land. The honey was there but the milk we brought in with our goats. To people in California, God gives a magnificent coastline, a movie industry, and Beverly Hills. To us He gives sand.

To Cannes He gives a plush film festival. We get the PLO. Our winters are rainy, our summers hot. To people who didn't know how to wind a wristwatch He gives underground oceans of oil. To us He gives hernia, piles, and anti-Semitism.

That passage also exemplifies a third comic device: the use of anachronisms.

Heller's narrative is not securely lodged in one historical period or place. David eats tacos, critiques Michelangelo's sculpture of him, and staunchly proclaims his heterosexuality, declaring that despite what he wrote about his love for Jonathan, he is "no Oscar Wilde." Bathsheba takes the pill, and invents panties and the miniskirt. Even more pervasive than the anachronisms are the running gags, for instance, David's frequent contentions that his writings have been plagiarized; comic dialogues, such as David's re-creation of God's conversation with Moses; and one liners reminiscent of modern Jewish comedians.

Key Questions

Given the popularity of David as a Biblical hero, particularly in the beloved story of his slaying of Goliath, God Knows is certain to strike a nerve with some readers in its vulgar language, detailed sex scenes, and disturbingly realistic portrayal of a nonheroic, self-pitying David in old age.

Readers' responses to certain stylistic features of the novel, such as the fragmented chronology, use of colloquial modern speech, and anachronistic references, should also lead to animated discussion.

1. In what major ways does Heller's David differ from the Biblical conception of him? How do Heller's portrayals of Saul, Jonathan, and Nathan differ from those in the Bible?

2. Why do you think Heller chose to portray David in old age?

3. What are Heller's David's most admirable and most disturbing traits?

4. Do you think that Abishag primarily nurtures David or psychologically torments him?

5. What conclusions can we draw about Heller's attitudes towards marriage from his portrayals of David's relationships with Abigail, Bathsheba, and Michal?

6. What are the major causes of dissension between David and his sons?

Why do they not show love towards their father? How do you respond to Heller's transformation of Solomon, renowned for his wisdom, into a fool?

7. Does Heller's title seems to you an acknowledgment of God's omniscience or a Yiddish expression of suffering?

8. Do you view David's monologue as glorifying his role, not as hero or king, as we might expect, but as victim?

9. Do you think David's self-concept is dependent on sexual performance?

10. Do you find the anachronisms and shifting idioms hilarious or irritating?

11. Of what significance is the ending of the novel in which David notes the resemblance between himself and Saul?

12. Can the estrangement between David and God can be breached?

Literary Precedents

The obvious literary precedent of God Knows is the King James Bible. Heller drew heavily upon events depicted in I and II Samuel and I Kings as inspiration for his narrative, although God Knows does contain scenes purely of the author's invention, such as David's visit to the Witch of Endor to consult with the shade of Moses. In Chapter One Heller acknowledges that the account of David in Chronicles little influenced his novel by having David exclaim, ". . . I hate Chronicles. In Chronicles I am a pious bore, as dull as dishwater and as preachy and insipid as that self-righteous Joan of Arc, and God knows I was never anything like that."

The King James Bible, however, is less important to Heller as a plot source than as a means of eliciting his readers' laughter, for much of the novel's comedy depends upon the contrast between the formal, exalted, lyrical prose of the King James Bible and the slang-and-vulgarityridden modern speech idiom David frequendy employs. The difference between the two idioms Heller most sharply exploits in David's memories of lovemaking with Bathsheba. David quotes the "pure, poetic, rapturous words" he used to woo Bathsheba, words Heller took directly from "Song of Solomon," while describing in graphic—some would say obscene—detail their sexual gymnastics.

Related Titles

Although God Knows departs from Heller's previous three novels in portraying a historical period and place remote from contemporary America and in not attacking a particular bureaucracy, as Heller does with the military in Catch-22 (1961; see separate entry), corporate business in Something Happened, and the federal government in Good as Gold, it shares with Heller's other books major thematic concerns. For example, Heller's first four novels all explore problematic father-son relationships, contain graphic sex scenes, depict jockeying for political power, convey a strong awareness of mortality, and paint a world that seemingly lacks justice and rationality. Furthermore, all four novels focus upon a protagonist who feels alienated and insecure.

Stylistic parallels between Heller's four novels are also apparent, especially in their fragmented chronology and caricatured characterizations. Probably God Knows is best likened to Something Happened, for in both works Heller employs a first-person monologue that through memory links the past to the present.

Heller's use of Yiddish dialect links God Knows with Good as Gold and reveals the author's continuing examination of his Jewish heritage.

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