The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing Short Guide

The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing by Melissa Bank

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Characters

With only two exceptions, Bank's stories focus on the life and personal development of Jane. We are introduced to her at age fourteen and watch her flounder through two long-term relationships before she fully accepts herself and achieves what we are left to assume is romantic bliss. By thus tracking this individual character, Bank is able to focus on numerous aspects of the experience of coming of age as a woman in the late twentieth century. The process for Jane is a treacherous one that only becomes smoother with self-acceptance.

Jane is also the mouthpiece for most of Bank's statements about the importance of familial bonds. Jane, though an urbane Manhattan professional, remains committed to her family to a degree that seems almost old-fashioned. Her reliance on her father and difficulty in accepting his passing underscore the real value of family. Furthermore, her relationship with her brother, Henry, receives a substantial amount of attention. Their sparring and mutual support represent the two sides of sibling interaction. Though often competitive or even malicious, Henry and Jane, like all siblings, lean heavily on each other for support and advice.

Even more than Henry, however, Jane's father plays a key role in her maturation.

His voice, even more than Jane's mother's, serves as a mouthpiece for Bank to make her own statements about the absurdity of how people treat one another. He counsels Jane when she becomes confused at her brother's first breakup; he advises her again when she experiences difficulty in her first co-habitation; he even teaches her how to cope with death: first by consoling her at her Aunt Rita's passing, then by comforting her at his own. Jane's father is Bank's best argument for maintaining the integrity of the nuclear family; she argues that it pro vides a bedrock of stability otherwise absent in the modern world.

The most unstable part of the modern world seems to be the romantic sphere, most conspicuously occupied by Archie Knox, the object of most of Bank's ruminations on romantic love. Jane meets Archie through her Aunt Rita and obsesses over the legends surrounding him for years before ever actually interacting with him. Thus, Banks uses him as a subject for the exploration of distant obsession and immediate, almost routine desire. Jane finally does meet and become involved with Archie, very quickly moving into his apartment. With Archie, Jane has more than the routine swings of a relationship to deal with. Archie is an alcoholic who at various times controls or succumbs to his drinking. Bank uses his alcoholism as the feature that separates his relationship with Jane from routine relationships. Addiction is not, in Bank's view, one of the common foibles that adults commonly overcome in their struggles to get along. Instead, it has the capacity to destroy Jane's best efforts. Bank's stories about Archie assert that being in any relationship might be tough, but some are altogether impossible.

Social Concerns

The majority of significant social concerns expressed in The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing revolves around the difficulty an individual faces in trying to fit into a larger society. The main characters of Bank's stories are variously confronted with gender and class divisions that make their movement in certain circles somewhat awkward. Though the divisions and frustrations Bank's characters experience might seem trivial, they reveal the presence, decades after the birth of feminism, of a tangible division between the careers available to women and those available to men.

Bank's short stories are principally focused on the difficulties faced by educated, middle-class women. She is concerned by the fact that, despite their education and their talents, these women are often excluded from the upper echelons of career success. In particular, she focuses on the inequities of the publishing industry in "My Old Man" and "The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Could Imagine." In these stories, Jane, Bank's heroine, struggles with her career in a prominent New York publishing house.

Introduced at a party to the biggest stars of the industry, Jane feels inadequate. "They think I'm a bimbo," she worries. Throughout the relatively short time she works in her publishing house, Jane is constantly concerned that her appearance and her relationship with Archie, an older man and a legend in the industry, are holding her back. Men, it seems, can excel despite their personal qualities, but she cannot.

What lies at the heart of the inequity Bank sees in corporate America is a denigration of femininity. Women, it seems, can succeed in business but only if they act like men. This becomes most clear in "The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Can Imagine" where Jane is driven out of the field not by a chauvinistic male superior but by another woman. Looking back, Jane muses, "I'd been a rising star at H—until Mimi Howlett, the new executive editor, decided I was just the lights of an airplane." Jane is immediately put out by Mimi, whose beauty and glamorous dress make her feel like a peasant. In spite of her alluring looks, Mimi is a ruthless, driven executive who is appar ently immune to maternal impulses to nurture her underlings. Though she is friendly to Jane, Mimi does not take the time to consider Jane's emotional struggles and her need to use her own wings. Mimi expects her subordinates to work according to her rules.

This attitude toward work betrays a latent machismo in Mimi. By making her childless, Bank emphasizes her masculinity or at least her rejection of maternity; Mimi has sacrificed her potential as a mother for her career. Mimi's coldness is a sharp contrast to Jane's sympathetic personality. This contrast calls attention to the American work ethic's ability to rob an individual of the capability and the desire to care for others.

Bank depicts a world where individuals must either sacrifice their hearts or their careers. For Bank this places a greater onus on women, who are traditionally saddled with the responsibilities of nurturing loved ones. Jane, for example, is called home to look after her dying father while her older brother is left alone to focus on his career.

Thus, Bank raises an interesting question: Is a workplace that forces women to act like men really a workplace that allows women an equal opportunity? If caring, nurturing qualities are not valued, men and women, both of whom might possess these traits typically gendered feminine, both lose as the workplace becomes a heartless battlefield.

In addition to gender divisions, Bank considers the consequences of class division. In the book's opening story, "Advanced Beginners," the fourteen-year-old Jane witnesses the breakdown of her brother Henry's relationship with his first girlfriend, Julia. The difference in their social background causes the schism. Though well-off, Jane's family is not nearly so rich as Julia's kin, who summer on Nantucket instead of the Jersey shore. When Henry accompanies Julia to Southampton to meet her family, he immediately senses that he is out of place: "he moved to the edge of the crowd and just watched. Suddenly, it seemed, he was drunk, in a suit that didn't fit, at a party where he didn't know anyone, and he was standing alone." Though Henry and Julia clearly interact well together, Henry's humiliation in her parents' home drives a wedge between them. Bank thus shows a concern about the continuing inability of people to move freely from one social strata to another. Different races or creeds might coalesce in the American melting pot, but class, Bank suggests, will always divide people, regardless of what they might have in common.

Unfortunately, the class divisions Bank considers are not significant enough to warrant real interest. The fine line between the upper-middle class and the wealthiest Americans is not, for the vast majority of workingclass readers, a distinction which can be appreciated or even understood. The lamentations of an adolescent girl who wants to summer in a more prestigious beach community do not seem doleful to those who never had summers at cottages. Even while lamenting the impossibility of overcoming class division, Bank alienates a substantial portion of her readership by focusing her stories exclusively on educated, financially secure individuals.

In one brief interlude, Bank also demonstrates a concern about the breakdown of the traditional family. "The Best Possible Light," one of only two stories which does not center on the trials of Jane, focuses on a family coming together for a rare dinner.

Barney, the thirty-something son, arrives at his mother's home unexpectedly, bringing his new girlfriend and some very odd news.

He announces that his lover Laurel is pregnant, but so is his ex-wife Julie. Barney is the father to both children and, though he plans to marry Laurel, he intends to support both children. Unfortunately, his job as a commercial jingle writer does not promise financial security.

This unorthodox arrangement occurs years after the family abandoned an experiment in communal living. The freedom and socialism espoused in the community were, in the final analysis, inadequate to meet the residents' needs. Apparently, though, the experience failed to teach Barney that some traditions are best upheld. Until Barney breaks the news, the dinner he enjoys with his mother and sisters is one of consummate domestic bliss. The members of the nuclear family interact sociably and

familiarly. Without taking a radically conservative stance or launching into a diatribe on family values, Bank suggests that the integrity of the family is crucial not for political or moral reasons but because of the comfort and security families offer. Barney's progressive stance has the potential to alienate his siblings; this, not the violation of any moral code, is the tragedy of Bank's story.

This commitment to the stability of the family is also emphasized in Bank's other stories. Jane considers her family, particularly her father, a bedrock of strength in an otherwise confusing world. Clearly, if the next cosmopolitan age is one that cannot make room for cohesive, caring families, Bank wants no part of it. Though urbane, her characters are emotionally needy. Only in the nonjudgmental confines of a family can these emotional needs be met.

Techniques

Bank adeptly blends comic and poignant moments to produce a literary cocktail that is as funny as it is touching. She thus reflects her view of love as a bittersweet emotion in the style of her stories. This blending of the comic and tragic is effective because of the force of the narrator's personality. Bank gives Jane a voice which is at once familiar and insightful.

All the stories in The Girls' Guide toHunting and Fishing are told in the first person.

With the exception of two tales, Jane narrates them all. This consistency allows the reader to retain a center usually absent in short story collections. Though Jane changes a great deal as she ages from fourteen to her late twenties, the quirks of her personality remain and become more endearing to the reader. Bank endows her narrator with the force of personality by consistently injecting the narrative of events with editorial comments. Mental asides and unspoken rebuttals allow the reader to understand the events related from the narrator's perspective.

Usually, this perspective clues the reader into the humor of the events. Occasionally, however, the narrator's voice conveys deep tragedy. The death of Jane's father is made more touching by the force of Jane's personality. Bank does not relate this or any of the other events in her stories objectively.

Instead, all occurrences, even the most minute ones, are filtered through the narrator.

In this way, The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing becomes a collection, not of objectively told stories, but of specific women's personal experiences rendered imaginatively by the author.

Themes

Bank's collection of stories is more concerned with timeless themes than social concerns specific to a time and place. Admittedly, she does describe the lives of a rather narrow set of people—upper-middle class New Englanders—but by teasing out the intricacies of the human mating ritual, she does offer insights into how men and women interact that could apply to any group of people at any time.

The themes Bank dwells on are all related to the relationships between people and their loved ones. She considers the entire gamut of emotions related to interpersonal relations, from the giddiness of first meetings to the somber melancholy of loss. Both romantic and familial relationships are dissected by Bank. Her final analysis of both types might be best described as bittersweet—all the joys arising out of loving relationships are inherently linked to frustrations and sorrows.

Over the course of the stories, Bank's protagonist learns how relationships work.

Along the way, she reveals many of the pitfalls that crowd the playing field, making love a dangerous game. She observes rather than experiences the first of these traps. In "Advanced Beginners" Jane watches her brother's first relationship crash as quickly as it took off. Only fourteen at the time, Jane is unable to understand what causes the affair to go awry. Thus, Bank opens her collection with a work which explores one of love's most compelling aspects: its incomprehensibility. In this way Bank places limits on her narrative's potential to fully relate the psychological intricacies of her characters' lives. If someone so close as a sister cannot understand her brother's heart, how might someone so distant as a reader understand a character's feelings? Even while concerned with a theme of the emotions, Bank thus dwells on the nature of writing.

The next story, "The Floating House," deals with one of love's most pernicious side effects: jealousy. On a trip with her first boyfriend, Jane must interact with his exgirlfriend. The awkwardness begins at the introduction and only intensifies throughout the course of the weekend. Though humorous in the extremity of its characters' actions, "The Floating House" does reveal some of the psychological effects of jealousy. It shows the capacity of this emotion to destroy an individual's social grace. Jane is unnerved by her jealousy of Bella, so she verbally lashes out at her hosts in a way that makes everyone uncomfortable. This confrontation occurs almost against her will: "I don't know what to do, so I talk." The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing is full of people who do not know what to do. "The Floating House," though, presents a situation which few people could handle expertly. Thus, Bank suggests that some pitfalls in a relationship cannot be avoided. Jane, like everyone, can be made jealous against her will, making her do very foolish things.

Jane comes fully of age only in the final story, "The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing." Here she meets a man at a wedding with whom she falls almost immediately in love. Desperate not to lose him, she consults, on advice from a friend, a selfhelp book that claims to offer surefire advice for capturing a husband. Not surprisingly, all the advice

backfires, serving to alienate the object of her desire rather than intrigue him. In the closing pages of the story and the book, Jane confesses to being misguided by the book and throws its advice aside, complaining: "You get all these voices about what a woman is supposed to be like—you know, feminine . . . and I've spent my whole life trying not to hear them."

The one time she does hear them, Jane almost loses what, Bank suggests, is the most important catch of her life. Thus, Bank presents an important thematic lesson about the pernicious effect of American society's attempt to define gender traits. It is important, Bank asserts, to remain true to oneself despite cultural pressures to conform to the expected behaviors of one's gender. Jane becomes fully adult only when she becomes fully immune to the suggestions of those around her.

One thematic footnote occurs in Bank's telling of the twists and turns of Jane's relationship with Archie. Bank, perhaps without intending to, opens the work up to psychoanalytic interpretation. Archie, the reader is told on several occasions, is old enough to be Jane's father; at one point in "My Old Man" Archie is actually mistaken for her father by a cemetery worker. Though her focus is on the social implications of taking such a taboo lover, Bank seems to lose control of the story as it explodes into a rendering of a character wrapped up in her Electra complex. This neurosis is, according to Sigmund Freud, the female equivalent of the Oedipus complex. The dynamic of the Electra complex is one in which the daughter desires the father. An odd twist in "The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Can Imagine" calls attention to Freud's maxims; Jane's father dies of leukemia and she is left torn between grieving with her family and caring for her sick lover. As with all psychoanalytic interpretation, this reading is open to criticism. Notwithstanding the validity of some of this criticism, it does, in the case of Bank's stories, offer the reader a fruitful entry into the story's nuances.

Many of the stories' more powerful passages occur when Bank turns her lens on the relationships between family members.

These interactions are as fraught with difficulties as romantic liaisons. Fortunately, the rewards of familial love are, if not always richer, more secure than the rewards of romantic affection.

Regardless of what state her love life is in, Jane can lean on the affection of her family. When baffled by her brother's failed romance in "Advanced Beginners," Jane consults her father for advice. In simple prose, Bank communicates the emotional intensity of this father-daughter conference: "his voice was so nice I felt like crying, and then I was. He handed me his handkerchief, which smelled of the pipe tobacco he kept in a pouch in his back pocket." This and many other passages show how easily a family member can release one's emotions.

It also demonstrates how much a minute familiarity can soothe a loved one.

Even later in life Jane depends on her family's support. Unfortunately, the family loses its foundation when her father dies of leukemia. This death is one of two Bank relates in

her stories. She uses these occasions to expound upon the theme of grieving as an inevitable part of a familial relationship. Jane's Aunt Rita becomes her first significant relation to die in "My Old Man."

Significantly, Jane is escorted to her funeral by Archie, the boyfriend Rita introduced her to. The scene demonstrates Bank's belief that even after their passing a family member's influence remains. Jane internalizes the lessons Rita taught her in life, so the deceased aunt remains a part of the living girl.

It is not difficult to find a positive thematic undercurrent in Bank's description of Jane's father's death. Long before he dies, he makes a conscious decision to conceal his illness from his children for as long as possible. Bank considers this self-sacrifice of a parent for his or her offspring's wellbeing an important theme. Jane and her brother are at first offended that their father would keep such important personal information from them for so long, but his assurance that he did so to protect their careers makes him appear highly sympathetic. Of all the aspects of familial relations explored in Bank's book, the capacity for self-negation may be the most powerful. Almost to the end, Jane's father is insistent that his children do not sacrifice their own lives for his own comfort. Bank's version of the outside world utterly lacks this compassion, a fact underscored by the fact that the death of Jane's father coincides with the greatest strife between Jane and her boss, Mimi.

Adaptations

The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing is available on audio cassette. It is read by the The Girls' Guide to Hunting and fishing author and published by Viking Penguin Audio.

Key Questions

Bank's collection of short stories is an extended meditation on the trials of contemporary womanhood. She paints a compelling and insightful portrait of life at the end of the twentieth century. It is an era of confusion where relationships are burdened by people's fear of commitment and of being themselves. Even while the psychological implications of modern life are outlined, Bank keeps her stories light and entertaining.

Though clearly set in the contemporary world, Bank's stories all consider a timeless theme: the nature of love, romantic and familial. Behind the rhetoric of family values, Bank finds good reason to conserve the bonds of nuclear families. They are bedrocks of emotional security for those fortunate enough to have them.

Interested as Bank is in conserving family cohesiveness, she demands progressive changes in the workplace. The women she depicts are not valued purely for their talents or intelligence. Furthermore, success seems to require a rejection of the bonds she so obviously values.

1. What makes Jane such an interesting narrator and compelling character?

2. Do you think Bank's collection closes on Jane's full realization of her personality? In other words, has Jane completed her maturation by the end?

3. What is your reaction to the strife between Henry and his girlfriend, Julia?

Was it really class differences that caused their breakup, or were there more serious issues between them?

4. Why does Jane fall for the older Archie?

Answers to this question can be supported by textual references or psychoanalytic theory.

5. Why are Jane's family members so important to her?

6. Could Bank's stories have been set in a different time, or are the themes discussed peculiar to the nineties?

7. What effect does Jane's Aunt Rita have on her life?

8. Is the cross-section of the population Bank draws on for her characters too narrow?

Literary Precedents

Bank's book of stories fits into an important literary tradition which includes some of the world's most notable authors. The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing is, in essence, a coming of age story. Often called by its German term, the bildungsroman narrates an individual's education. This education can be artistic, spiritual, or, as is the case in Bank's book, social. Though most bildungsroman are novels, Bank's collection of stories, adheres, in its chronological focus on Jane's life, to the convention of moving from a protagonist's innocent beginning, through many mistakes, to a full maturation. The very title of the first story, "Advanced Beginners," underscores the notion that Bank's work is one of personal development. In the final story, Jane has rejected the dictates of others and gained the confidence to handle her social interactions on her own terms. Thus, she follows the standard track from innocence to experience.

Many critics consider Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1796 novel Wilihelm Meister's Apprenticeship the seminal text of this genre.

Goethe's work tracks the personal and artistic development of its hero while also delving into Romantic meditations on philosophic issues. It, like Bank's story cycle, narrates an individual's maturation, while also speculating on the social and thematic concerns of the era.

But Bank's work is unlike most bildungsroman because Jane, whose development the reader witnesses, does not aspire to artistic greatness. Instead of the tortured artist, Bank tells the story of the tortured everywoman, so burdened by mundane concerns that she does not need brooding visions of greatness to cause stumbles and lessons.

Bank's implicit critique of the structure of corporate America recalls David Mamet's play Glengarry, Glen Ross (1983). In this portrait of the business world's seedy underbelly, men vie with each other for dominance. The play's dialogue fairly reeks of testosterone. Women only appear obliquely as meddlers who queer the deals made by men. This depiction of the potential for the American work ethic to denigrate the feminine is taken up, albeit more subtly, by Bank. Jane responds to the macho environment of the publishing industry by withdrawing; unfortunately, the men in Mamet's play are trapped, unable to escape in the manner Bank suggests.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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