A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich Short Guide

A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich by Alice Childress

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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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Overview

examines questions of human relationships, self-image, racial identity, and personal commitment while telling the story of one boy's struggle against drug addiction. Filled with interesting, realistic characters, Childress's story deals honestly and believably with difficult questions.

From the first, the novel demands the reader's intelligent participation. Many characters present conflicting views of racial experiences, poverty, and drug use. The reader must evaluate each point of view, allowing for the personal bias of each. The novel also provides an opportunity for many readers to experience life in the New York inner city.

Although the setting is specifically urban, readers from all types of environments can relate to Benjie Johnson's confusion and need for direction in his life, to his disappointment in the adults he knows, and to his joy when he realizes that he is indeed loved. Suspense builds throughout the book about whether Benjie can "kick" his habit and whether he will find a reason to do so— in his relationships with others, in his black pride, or in his own will.

About the Author

A lice Childress was born on October 12, 1920, in Charleston, South Carolina, and grew up in Harlem, New York City. She attended New York public schools and later studied at Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study. She has a strong theater background as an actress, director, and playwright, and has authored several plays based on the black American experience, including Trouble in Mind (1955), Wedding Band (1966), and most recently Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne (1986). In recent years, Childress has also written several novels: A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich and Rainbow Jordan for young adults and A Short Walk (1979) and Many Closets (1987) for adults.

Many of her works have been adapted for film and television, and she has written several screenplays, including one for the film based on her novel A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich. Childress says, "I think in scenes"; thus, even her novels have characteristics of plays.

They contain little physical description of settings, and dialogue carries much of the burden for revealing character and moving the story along.

Childress's works, both plays and novels, deal with controversial subjects such as racism and drug addiction and have been banned in several places. One censorship case involving A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich went all the way to the Supreme Court. That novel, however, won the Woodward Park (Brooklyn) School Book Award (1975), the Jane Addams Honor Award (1974), and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award (1975). It was nominated for the 1974 National Book Award and appeared on School Library Journals and English Journal's lists of best books of 1973. Childress's works are widely admired for their honesty, power, insight, and compassion, and critics have acclaimed the universal and timeless qualities of her writing.

Setting

The novel is set in Harlem in the early 1970s. The central character, Benjie Johnson, says that his home is variously referred to as "a slum," "a ghetto," or "the inner city," but that it is the same depressing place by any name. As the title implies, this world lacks heroes; drugs are readily available, and both home and school environments seem unstable. The novel takes place in the winter, and Benjie feels that the season's bleakness and coldness typify his life. Against the gray backdrop of poverty, pain, and separation, human efforts to triumph over circumstances stand out in brilliant, sometimes pitiful, contrast.

Social Sensitivity

Childress treats racial issues frankly.

Most of the characters are black and present a variety of black perspectives, ranging from those who distrust and blame "whitey" for black problems but who emulate white lifestyles, to those who blame blacks for their own problems, to those who see no possibility for reconciliation between the races. The author also portrays the nonblack perspectives of Bernard Cohen and the school principal, who speak as forthrightly of their experiences as do the black characters. The book does not moralize or preach one particular view but treats all the perspectives fairly and compassionately.

Childress also deals honestly with the problem of drug addiction. Some scenes in the novel depict Benjie seeking out and using drugs, and the boy gives various excuses to rationalize his addiction. But overall the book shows the dangers of drugs and condemns their use. The reader learns why traditional approaches to curbing drug traffic may be ineffective, why social workers often fail to influence the drug user to quit, and why schools and communities are frequently unable to unite to find a solution. The novel does not conclude that the drug problem is unsolvable but clearly shows the difficulties involved.

Depictions of violence and death appear in the story, and many of the characters use very frank language, the "language of the streets." But these elements are entirely appropriate, even essential, to an honest portrayal of the locale and subject matter. The novel emphasizes the endurance of the human spirit, even under extremely adverse conditions, and the power of love between people to make a difference.

Another important issue the book confronts is the inability or unwillingness of individuals and groups to understand the viewpoints of others. Childress's multiple first-person point of view, which allows the reader to hear each character speaking with whatever word choice, tone, and bias may be appropriate, brilliantly makes this point.

Literary Qualities

takes a realistic look at life in the inner city. An all-too-human Benjie confronts a situation that defeats him throughout most of the book. Society's usual answers to the problems of poverty, racism, alienation, and drug dependency fail him. Childress challenges the term "hero" itself. The suggestion by Benjie and his social worker that a hero is a movie idol or sports figure is rejected in favor of Butler's insistence that he is the true hero: an ordinary human being who each day does what he must do to endure and survive.

The realistic novel usually offers little optimism for a happy outcome. In A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich, the ending is indeterminate, making Childress's point that many human problems lack easy answers. Characters in realistic novels typically display a fair share of weaknesses as well as strengths. Their experiences are presented in the often stark detail of real life. Childress relates her characters' experiences through a multiple first-person narration. Each character presents his or her own experiences and attitudes to the reader, using appropriate and realistic style, diction, and language.

The reader seems to be participating in a series of one-on-one conversations, giving immediacy, plausibility and authenticity to the story. This technique makes for strong characterization; each speaker is clearly differentiated from all the others, and Childress lets each one make his or her case without taking sides.

Childress's symbolic use of color heightens her portrayal of reality. In realistic novels, settings are often bleak, wintry and lifeless, reflecting the fact that many people live in far from ideal conditions. Benjie's world is primarily a black, white and gray one. When a character tries to rise above, or in some way relieve, the harshness of the environment, the attempt is associated with vivid color. Benjie's mother, called Rose, tries to cleanse away the boy's troubles by bathing him in indigo dye she has obtained from a fortuneteller. Benjie, encouraged to express his individuality by buying his own clothing, chooses a bright orange suit. And Nigeria Greene's description of the flag for the black nation he dreams of emphasizes the colors green, red, and black.

Some literary qualities Childress displays in her works include placing her characters' struggles in historical perspective by referring to important black leaders and recounting various anecdotes about black experiences with racism; introducing a variety of memorable characters, whose views offer a complexity of choices; drawing subtle characterizations, revealing individuals only through their own words and through other characters' sometimes changing judgments of them; and developing a suspenseful plot that builds toward an ambiguous, but hopeful, conclusion.

Themes and Characters

The characters include thirteen-yearold Benjie, his friends and family members, his teachers and principal, drug pushers, and a fortuneteller. Benjie is the central character, but of almost equal importance is the boy's "stepfather," Butler Craig, who lives with Benjie's mother.

Benjie uses heroin but insists that he can stop whenever he chooses. He blames others around him for his problems, including his former best friend, Jimmy-Lee, who started Benjie on drugs and then stopped "using" himself. Benjie sees his mother, Rose, and his grandmother, Mrs. Bell, as overly critical and uninterested in him. Most of all, he blames Butler, who Benjie feels can simply walk away from the family if he chooses.

In school, Benjie idolizes Nigeria Greene, a fiery Black Nationalist who instills racial pride in his students at the expense of the prescribed school curriculum. Benjie also grudgingly admires Bernard Cohen, a Jewish teacher who resents being considered the "enemy," but who helps his seventh-grade pupils learn, at last, to read. The boy feels betrayed when the two teachers, usually at odds with each other, join forces to turn him in to school authorities for drug use. Benjie is an appealing character but is often unfair in his judgments of other people.

Rose Johnson loves her son Benjie but cannot articulate her love to him. She has had a hard life herself, bringing up the boy alone after his father deserted them. Benjie's grandmother loves the boy too but retreats from an increasingly A Hem Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich puzzling and frightening world into a combination of religion and superstition.

Butler tries to be a father to Benjie but is keenly aware that he has no official status in the boy's life. Butler loves to play the saxophone but cannot make a living doing so; instead, he works at a janitorial job he hates in order to support himself, Rose, her mother, and her son. The reader gradually comes to know and appreciate Butler but is surprised along with Benjie when Butler risks his own life to save the boy's. When Benjie then writes one hundred times "BUTLER IS MY FATHER," the reader finally realizes the depth of the characters' feelings for each other.

One chapter is told from the point of view of Benjie's high school principal, who comments that the students are better off for having both Greene and Cohen as teachers. But he himself has given up on finding a solution to the school's serious drug problem and longs to retire. In another chapter, a drug pusher rationalizes what he does, saying that if he did not supply junkies someone else would. No character is totally evil or totally good. Childress presents each with understanding and compassion, but with sometimes devastating fairness.

The title of the book suggests one of its major themes: the traditional idea of a hero—a person larger than life who performs deeds beyond most people's capabilities—is inaccurate. Real heroes, the novel says, are ordinary people facing ordinary problems.

Other themes include racism and the need to confront it; the inability of the "system"—including social workers, teachers, even celebrities—to solve society's problems; the mutual dependency of human beings; the difficulty people in any one group or generation have in understanding problems of those in other groups; and the importance of personal commitment: "If you into somethin, be in it."

Adaptations

has been adapted for a movie of the same title, with a screenplay by Alice Childress. The film was released in 1978 by New World Pictures and features Paul Winfield, Cicely Tyson, Larry B. Scott, Glynn Turman, and David Groh. The locale is changed in the movie to Los Angeles, and the point of view becomes dramatic objective, or the camera's eye, letting the story unfold in a straightforward style and eliminating the various characters' views of events found in the novel.

Benjie's motivation for using drugs, then for trying to quit, is less clear in the movie, and Butler's love of Benjie is more obvious throughout. The movie version adds a touching speech by Nigeria Greene at Carwell's (Kenny's) funeral and a powerful series of still photographs showing Benjie going through drug withdrawal. The movie's ending shows Benjie actually appearing at the drug rehabilitation center, in contrast to the novel's indeterminate ending. Because of strong performances by actors in all the movie's important roles, the viewer becomes fully involved with the characters and their struggles, as does the reader of the novel.

Topics for Discussion

1. Benjie says in the first chapter that he hates for people to lie to him and that he does not "dig stealin," yet he admits in the same chapter that he has stolen and has lied about it. Throughout the story, we see him both lie and steal.

What does this tell us about Benjie?

2. Jimmy-Lee blames only "skag" for the distance between himself and Benjie. Are there other differences between them that cause problems in their relationship? Why or why not?

3. Benjie relates that he used heroin the first time to show that he was not "chicken." Would it have taken more courage to say no to his friends? Why or why not?

4. Over and over, Benjie says that he is not "hooked" and that he can quit any time he wants to. Can he? Point out some details from the story to support your answer.

5. Walter tells us that if he did not sell drugs there would be plenty of others who would, so those who want drugs could get them just as easily. Is his reasoning justified? Why or why not?

6. Benjie sometimes delivers drugs for Walter to pay for his "fix." He says, though, that he is not the real pusher.

Is he less guilty than Walter? Why is he glad he was not the one who gave Kenny the overdose?

7. Why does Benjie's grandmother put a lock on her door? Is she justified?

What effect does her use of the lock have on Benjie? Why?

8. The novel is written in the language of the individuals telling the story, much of it in street dialect. Would it have been as effective and as believable in standard English? Why or why not? Does a person's use of dialect in speech or writing show a lack of intelligence? A lack of education?

9. Rose tries to tell Benjie that she loves him, but her attempts come out as criticism. Why? Is it often difficult to express one's true feelings to others?

Why?

10. Is Butler a good "father figure" for Benjie throughout the novel? Is there a change in him? If so, when does this change take place?

11. About the doctor and Jimmy-Lee, Benjie says that neither is "the worst person in the world." He later repeats this phrase directly to Butler. What does he mean? Does he ever praise anyone more highly than in this statement?

12. What is the meaning of the title?

Does it help you to understand the story? Why or why not?

13. Butler sometimes says he would like to send Benjie to some place out of town, maybe in the South, in a country setting. Do you think it likely that this would solve Benjie's problems? Why or why not?

14. At the end of the book, Butler is waiting for Benjie to come to the drug rehabilitation center. Reread Benjie's own last narrative. Do you think Benjie will go? What details in the story lead you to believe he will or will not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The novel mentions several black leaders from the past: Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Who are some other well-known leaders from the black community? Select one for a short research paper.

2. In his second narrative, Jimmy-Lee seems envious of the attention, especially extra favors, given to people who have been in drug detoxification or some other form of detention. He feels he should be rewarded for not being on drugs and for doing well in school.

Should he, or is doing well its own A Hero Aln't Nothin' but a Sandwich reward? Do those who have reformed, or are trying to do so, get extra privileges?

Is this just?

3. Mr. Cohen tells Benjie, "You can be somebody if you want to," and Benjie complains, "How does he know I'm not somebody right now?" Why do adults and young people see this issue differently?

4. Who are some of your heroes? What are their heroic qualities? On the next to the last page of the novel, Butler presents his own credentials for hero status. How do they compare with those of your heroes?

5. Benjie says that he wants someone special who believes in him. What does he really want? Does he know? Should anyone believe in him? Point out details from the book to support your argument.

6. The characters who speak throughout the novel often disagree with each other about the causes of, and solutions to, problems. How does Childress help you to make judgments about the believability of any character or statement?

For Further Reference

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