Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry Study Guide

Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry by Elizabeth McCracken

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In the short story, “Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry,” Elizabeth McCracken introduces a larger-than-life character, Aunt Helen Beck, a woman in her eighties who has traveled the country for most of her life, showing up at the homes of distant relatives who have only vaguely heard of her, if they have at all. She arrives at an island in Seattle’s Puget Sound to stay with a great nephew and his wife. In the course of her visit, they learn to put up with the trials of having their lives invaded by an outspoken aged relative. At the same time, their suspicions grow that she is actually not who she says she is. Each character is rendered imaginatively as a familiar type, but also as a unique individual. McCracken tells the story with an unerring eye for details and a subtle sense of humor that recognizes the underlying strangeness of ordinary modern life.

“Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry” was published in McCracken’s 1993 short story collection of the same name. This was her first story collection, published when the author was just a few years out of college, and it helped to establish McCracken as one of the most gifted young writers of her generation.

Author Biography

Elizabeth McCracken was born in 1966. Her father, Samuel McCracken, was a writer and editor and an assistant to the provost of Boston University, where her mother, Natalie, also worked. McCracken attended Boston University, where she graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of Arts in English, both in 1988. She then attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, taking an M.F.A. in 1990. She earned a Master of Science degree in library and information science from Drexel University in 1993. After graduation she was the circulation desk chief at the Somerville Public Library, in Somerville, Massachusetts, where she lived from 1993 to 1997. She was the community arts director for the Somerville Arts Council in 1995 and 1996.

McCracken's first book was the short story collection, *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, a compilation of nine stories that was published in 1993. The book earned her critical and popular attention, and it was listed as a Notable Book of the Year by the National Library Association. Following its publication, McCracken taught writing at the Somerville Arts Council, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and at Western Michigan University. She published her first novel, *The Giant's House* in 1996, again to strong critical praise. It was followed in 2001 by the novel *Niagara Falls All Over Again*. Her short stories and essays have appeared in leading magazines.

McCracken has been the recipient of several important awards. Her works were included in *Best American Short Stories* in 1991 and 1992 and in *Best American Essays* in 1994. The American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded her the Harold Vursell Award in 1997. She won the *Salon* Award and was included among the Best Young American Novelists, both in 1996, for *The Giant's House*. In 1998, she won a prestigious Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

Plot Summary

“Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry” starts by introducing Aunt Helen Beck, a legendary older woman who stays in the houses of relatives so frequently that the children in houses where she stayed lived to tell stories about her to their own children, some of whom eventually meet her themselves when she comes to stay. Among her eccentricities is her dictation of letters for the children to write to people she has known who are dead; another is that she carries a small change purse with two pennies in it, though she will not show the pennies to anyone.

Aunt Helen Beck arrives at Orcas Island in Puget Sound to stay with Ford and his wife, Chris, after having stayed with Ford’s sister Abbie a few years previously. When they meet her at the ferry, Ford asks how long she intends to stay, and Aunt Helen Beck (who is always referred to by all three names) becomes defensive and asks if he is trying to chase her away already, using the colloquial expression for being pushed out the door that gives the story its title. She gives Ford a small framed photo of a man who she says is his great-grandfather, Patrick Corrrigan, explaining that she always brings gifts for the people with whom she stays.

When they drive her back to their house, they are met by Mercury, a boy who lives in a nearby trailer. Aunt Helen Beck chides him about his long hair, which he says he likes. During the discussion while dinner is being prepared, Aunt Helen Beck says that she came up from Vallejo, California, where she stayed for a while with a niece. She lists some of the people at whose homes she has been a guest over the years.

When dinner is over, she tells them about the change purse she carries with the two pennies, explaining that it was made for her by her brother George, who was a child preacher but died young.

About a week into her stay, Aunt Helen Beck allows Chris to overhear her making a phone call to someone, suggesting that she might come to visit and clearly giving a negative response. Chris, feeling that she does not feel welcome to stay, tells her that she should plan on staying with them for as long as she likes.

Mercury becomes very attached to Aunt Helen Beck, following her around the house. When she hears about how his mother treats her children, Aunt Helen Beck disapproves. She recites morbid poetry to Mercury and tells him stories about her life. She feeds him molasses, an old health cure, and is surprised to find that Mercury is one of the few children she has met who actually enjoys it. She has him write letters for her to departed relatives, a practice that she has followed in other relatives’ houses.

The day after she shows him her change purse, though, it disappears. Aunt Helen Beck is deeply distressed by the loss of the talisman she has carried with her for more than sixty years. After the house is searched, Mercury is confronted, and he denies taking it, but his denial is unconvincing. He continues to deny it, and the loss of her one reminder

of Georgie Beck, her brother who died when he was a child, changes Aunt Helen Beck's view of the world, throwing her into despair.

Details in Aunt Helen Beck's biography start raising suspicions. She says that her mother raised twenty-one children and that her family was Jewish, though Ford knows nothing about any Jewish relatives. She senses Ford and Chris's suspicions and feels uneasy about her stay.

One day Mercury shows up at the house and politely asks Aunt Helen Beck to cut his hair. His mother, he explains, likes it long and would not cut it if he asked. She obliges. Mercury is pleased with the job that she does, though Ford worries about what the boy's mother will say.

Chris and Ford confront Aunt Helen Beck about whether she is actually related to Ford. She refuses to answer, even when Ford offers to accept her if she is only a close family friend. She explains that she came to be connected with the family after Ford's sister donated some magazines to the public library, finding her address on the mailing labels. There was a real Georgie Beck, she tells them: he was a child preacher who she went to see when she was sixteen; she nursed him when he was ill, taking his name and the change purse after he died. Ford starts to say that she does not have to leave, but Chris interrupts him to say that she should.

In the night, Aunt Helen Beck steals a candlestick to give as a gift to whoever is to be her next hosts. She leaves the house as the sun is rising and is stopped by Mercury, whose mother, angry about his haircut, has thrown him out of the house. As they walk away from the house together, she puts a hand on him and asks if he likes to travel.

Characters

Aunt Helen Beck

Aunt Helen Beck is an elderly woman who has never owned a home. Throughout her long life—at the time of this story, she is in her eighties—she has traveled the country, staying with people to whom she says she is related. Generations of people have grown up believing that she is their aunt. None of these presumed relatives has ever called her anything other than “Aunt Helen Beck.”

In truth, she has no known relatives. When she was sixteen and homeless, she went to visit a child preacher who had once toured through her town, named Georgie Beck. She established a bond with him and nursed him when he was ill. When Georgie died, she kept his last name and began the practice of presenting herself at the homes of strangers, claiming to be a distant relative.

She stays with people who are amused by her eccentric ways. They compare stories about the things they have observed her doing, such as having children write the letters that she dictates to people she has known, who are now dead, or reciting the works of obscure poets with three names. Often, when she has stayed with someone, she will eventually end up at the door of that person’s relatives. Wherever she goes, she arrives with a small gift for her hosts, claiming that it is a family heirloom, even if it is just something that she bought or stole from strangers.

In this story she arrives at Orcas Island to stay with a young couple, Ford and Chris, claiming to be related to Ford’s great-grandfather, Patrick Corrigan. Several years earlier, she had stayed with Ford’s sister, Abbie. She is outspoken with Ford and Chris about things that she does and does not like and is defensive about anything they say that might indicate that they would like her stay to be brief. She does, however, try to be as little trouble to them as a houseguest can be. She buys them meager little gifts when they go to town.

Aunt Helen Beck forms a bond with the boy who lives in a nearby trailer, Mercury. When the change purse that she has carried for more than sixty years disappears, she is distressed: “What will become of me without it?” she asks no one in particular. It was made by Georgie Beck. She becomes lonesome after Mercury, denying anything to do with the purse’s disappearance, stops coming to visit. He later shows up and asks her to cut his long hair, which she dislikes, as an unspoken act of contrition.

After she slips up and tells conflicting stories about her father, Ford becomes suspicious and, doing some research, discovers that she is no relation at all, and Aunt Helen Beck agrees to leave the house. Before she goes, though, she steals a candlestick as a present for the next people she will visit. At the story’s end, she appears ready to invite Mercury to join her in her travels.

Chris

Chris is married to Ford and, therefore, has never been led to believe that Aunt Helen Beck is a relative of hers. For this reason, Chris has less sentimental attachment to the old woman and is less likely to find charm in her manipulative ways. She works carefully, meticulously, at stringing beads to make necklaces, which she sells in local shops. Aunt Helen Beck characterizes Chris as “quiet and perennially embarrassed,” which she approves of, even though this means that Chris’s personality is the opposite of her own. As she lives with them, Aunt Helen Beck becomes more accustomed to Chris, getting over her initial hesitation about Chris’s friendly hugs. When it is discovered that Aunt Helen Beck is not really related to Ford, it is Chris who takes personal offense, calling the older woman a liar and a fraud and insisting, when Ford starts to weaken, that she really must leave their house.

Ford

Ford lives with his wife, Chris, on Orcas Island, in Puget Sound, Washington. They are vegetarians, and Ford does the cooking at least part of the time. When Aunt Helen Beck shows up, she explains that she is related to Ford’s great-grandfather, who was an uncle of hers, though not a blood relation. She gives him a picture of the man she says is their distant relative, though it later turns out that the person in the picture is an actor wearing a costume moustache.

Because he is a gentle person, Ford tries to calm any situation. When Aunt Helen Beck seems to take offense that he is thinking of keeping her visit short, Ford tries to make it sound as if it would be a favor to them if she would stay. When her change purse disappears, he recognizes it for its psychosocial significance, calling it her “talisman”: he rationally suggests that she replace it with another object that could have just as much emotional significance to her. After becoming convinced that Aunt Helen Beck is a fraud and not related to him at all, he confronts her only reluctantly, not nearly as willing as Chris is to insist that she leave. Ford is spiritual; he writes poems addressed to “The Earth” and “The Goddess” and leaves them around the house. He is an intellectual and plainly longs to discuss theories of sociology and religion with an older relative: recognizing this leads Aunt Helen Beck to understand that “he was the type of man who wanted to be invited to join every club there was. Even hers.”

Gaia

Gaia does not appear in the story, but she is talked about. She is a single mother, raising four children in a trailer down the hill from Ford and Chris’s house. Her children are all named after planets: Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. She works part time at the Healing Arts Center, doing a form of massage therapy.

Although Gaia has a casual attitude toward having children and raising them, she also has a strict side, a harsh temper, and can be abusive. Angry that Mercury has let Aunt Helen Beck cut his hair, she locks the boy outside all night to teach him a lesson.

Mercury

Mercury is a young boy who lives near Ford and Chris's house. He is brash and undisciplined: when he first appears in the story, for instance, he sees Ford, Chris, and Aunt Helen Beck in a car and says to Chris, "You're ridin' in back like a *dog*." He has long hair because his mother, Gaia, does not believe in cutting her children's hair.

Mercury and Aunt Helen Beck form an unlikely alliance. When she gives him molasses, for instance, he does not reject her, as other children might: to her surprise, he likes the taste. He follows her around as she does her household chores and agrees to write a letter for her, even though he knows only a few words and the letter she is dictating is to an old acquaintance who is now dead.

Mercury commits a serious offense against Aunt Helen Beck when he steals her change purse: she says that it was given to her more than sixty-five years earlier by Georgie Beck, who she claims was her brother, and is the one constant in her vagabond lifestyle. Mercury denies taking it and is banished from the house. Later, he gets back into Aunt Helen Beck's good graces by coming to her and asking her to cut his hair.

Cutting his hair makes Mercury's mother angry at him, and his punishment is that he is locked out of the family trailer all night. As with all other signs that he is a neglected child, Mercury is passively disinterested in this fate. In the morning, when he runs into Aunt Helen Beck as she is leaving, she shows an interest in taking him along on her uncharted travels.

Themes

Mourning

Throughout “Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry” one of the most telling clues of Aunt Helen Beck’s elusive personality remains hidden: readers are not made aware of the depth of her true relationship with Georgie Beck until the story’s end. When she first explains him to Ford and Chris, Aunt Helen Beck says that he was her younger brother, a child preacher who toured the South proselytizing. Before his untimely death, she says, he made the change purse for her as a gift, and she has carried it with her for most of her life. After she is exposed as not a real member of Ford’s family, she admits that she was not really related to Georgie either. As a sixteen-year-old with nowhere to live, she was attracted to him because she once saw him preach, and she stayed with him through his final illness, stealing the change purse he had made for his real brother.

Although Aunt Helen Beck is untruthful about much in her life, her emotional attachment to the boy who died more than sixty years earlier is sincere. She is genuinely distraught when the change purse disappears because it is, as she explains, the only remaining thing on earth that Georgie Beck would have touched. When she is found out as a fraud and reflects on her true relationship with Georgie, she dwells on the fact that he once told her that he loved her, putting more emphasis on that fact than on his subsequent statement that God loves her, too. She held onto the change purse over the decades as a tangible symbol of his love, and when it disappears she becomes uncertain of her own identity. Her relationship to the memory of Georgie Beck has an emotional truth that means more to Aunt Helen Beck than any of the details about reality, which she has learned to manipulate over the years.

Journey

Aunt Helen Beck’s life is one long journey. She never stays in one place very long, always making preparations for her next stopping place. It is not a quest, because she is not looking for any one particular thing that will fulfill her inner needs. Still, she would be willing to stop her travels immediately, if the situation allowed it: while staying with Ford and Chris, she reflects that “all it would take would be one person saying, Aunt Helen Beck, here’s where you belong, and she’d stay in a minute.”

At the end of the story, she is clearly on the verge of inviting Mercury to be her traveling companion. Although she has been angry at Mercury, she realizes that he is a neglected child being raised in an instable home and that he would be better with a life like hers, on the road, with no ties. For people like Aunt Helen Beck and Mercury, life is a journey.

Family

One family presented in this story is Gaia's. Gaia has several children by different fathers and is likely to have several more, and she leaves the children to roam the neighborhood unsupervised. Her situation is described to Aunt Helen Beck by Ford and Chris, who excuse it as harmless. At the end of the story, however, it turns out that Gaia is not just a nontraditional parent, but a dangerous one: offended that Mercury has had his hair cut, she locks the young boy out of his home, leaving him exposed the elements all night.

When she arrives at their house, Aunt Helen Beck falls naturally into the role of a parent figure for Ford and Chris. To Ford, she is someone with whom he can discuss moral and religious issues for which he wants answers, and she compares his own spirituality with that of Georgie Beck. She is even more of a companion for Chris, whom she admires for her patience as she works at home beading necklaces. They both ask her about family and history, the way a child would do of a parent.

The strongest familial bond in this story is the one that develops between Aunt Helen Beck and Mercury. Despite her natural distrust of children, particularly male children, he attaches himself to her. Mercury actually likes the molasses that other children on whom she has foisted it have rejected, and he is willing to write the letters she dictates, even though he is embarrassed about his weak writing skills. After being alienated from her because of the missing change purse, he atones by allowing her to cut his hair. Together, Aunt Helen Beck, Ford and Chris, and Mercury temporarily create an artificial family of grandmother, parents, and child, even though the group is not actually related that way.

Style

The first section of “Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry” establishes Aunt Helen Beck as a legendary figure. Her advanced age is not specifically stated but is instead suggested through the impressions of people who experienced her strange visits when they were children and then, when they were old enough to have their own children, saw her again. Her personality quirks, such as her belief in molasses as a medical cure or her interest in certain poets, help to make her memorable to readers, but they also help readers see her as someone who would be talked about by friends and relatives, to such a degree that people who never met her would recognize her from stories that they had heard. McCracken capitalizes the expression, Aunt Helen Beck Stories, to let readers know that the legends told about her have a life of their own, independent of the woman herself.

With this background established, the story uses Aunt Helen Beck’s activities on Orcas Island as a way of contrasting her life there with her larger-than-life legend. When she gives Mercury molasses, for instance, or when she dictates a letter to him, readers recognize actions that have been identified as the ones that are discussed about her. When she takes an interest in Ford and Chris’s lives, though, the details of her life make her appear more ordinary than the Aunt Helen Beck who stars in the family tales. Her time with Ford and Chris might eventually serve to expand her legend, but for the time covered in the story this legendary figure is presented as an ordinary human being.

Historical Context

In this story, Aunt Helen Beck travels around the country, moving from the home of one family of strangers to another. She has been doing this since the Great Depression. She has never had a home of her own. Because of her considerable survival skills, readers may be inclined to admire her for her freedom, but in fact she is an unusual example of homelessness, a serious and pervasive problem in the United States.

According to estimates made in the 1996 *National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients*, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, at any given time, there are about 800,000 people in the United States without a home, including about 200,000 children who are members of homeless families. There are many causes of homelessness. While some people, like Aunt Helen Beck, may chose a nomadic lifestyle for personal reasons, many people find homelessness a most unwanted situation. Some lose their homes due to natural disasters, such as the devastation that Hurricane Katrina caused to tens of thousands of people in Louisiana and Mississippi in 2005. Some become homeless when an unexpected personal catastrophe, such as an illness, wipes out their savings and makes them unable to pay for their living quarters. Other factors can include an inability to assimilate, due to language or cultural barriers, after immigrating to a new country, and an inability to reenter society after a prison sentence or military commitment has been completed.

Estimates provided by the Coalition for the Homeless Mentally Ill reported in an fact sheet available at http://www.barkson.com/chmi/causes.htm (accessed September 11, 2006) that the homeless who have serious mental illness run as high as 33 percent. Added to that is how much addiction to alcohol and other drugs determines the number of homeless people who are unable to maintain steady housing; though not definitively measurable, some researchers estimate 38 percent of the homeless population are affected by substance abuse problems. There is no clear consensus about whether substance abuse causes homelessness or vice versa, but it is clear that there is a disproportionately high co-occurrence of substance abuse and homelessness.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, homelessness was a serious yet increasingly hidden problem in the United States. This trend began in the 1970s, a result of the Community Mental Health Act passed by Congress in 1963. The act was intended to integrate mental health patients into regular society, but underfunding led to turning thousands of people out on the streets without the social support they would need to fend for themselves. At the same time, many urban areas were eliminating the very least expensive available housing, the Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs). Between 1970 and the mid-1980s, the United States lost a million inexpensive rooms that were available to the poor, as sections of cities that had been considered skid rows were transformed into desirable urban areas. The homeless were also removed from view by a wave of anti-loitering laws passed in large cities in the 1980s that were designed to make downtown areas less threatening and more appealing to suburbanites with discretionary money to spend. The result moved homeless people

from the streets to less public areas, such as parks and subways, but it did nothing to address their problems.

By the 1990, around the time when this story was written, there was a renewed interest in the plight of the homeless. Celebrities did public service announcements to make the issue more visible, and it was used as a subject for television dramas. Still, the fact that laws in larger cities were purposely aimed at keeping this problem out of the public eye led the majority of people to miss the fact that, even with the booming economy in the 1990s, the homeless population continued to grow.

Critical Overview

From the very start of her career, Elizabeth McCracken has been recognized as a major literary talent. “Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry” comes from her first published book, a short story collection of the same name. Some of these stories were written when McCracken was still in college. Stories from the book were included in the *Best American Stories* collections for 1991 and 1992, and the book was listed as an American Library Association Notable Book of 1993. Reviews of the collection were generally favorable. Many mentioned the title story as a good example of McCracken’s skill in handling eccentric characters that are, despite their eye-catching flair, viewed with compassion and humanity. As Janet Ingraham puts it in a review entitled “Word of Mouth,” in *Library Journal*: “These nine stories reveal the oddness of ordinary life by inverting the theme of skeletons in the closet: the characters appear unusual but live familiar lives of quiet hardship and comedy.” Eight years later, after the publication of McCracken’s novel *The Giant’s House*, *Library Journal* came back to *Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry* in an overview of books that readers may have missed the first time around, with reviewer Nancy Pearl concluding that “McCracken’s vision is at once both eccentric and wise, an unbeatable combination that makes for great reading.”

The Giant’s House, McCracken’s first novel, was almost universally praised by critics. Her second book, *Niagara Falls All Over Again*, was met though with mixed praise: many critics proclaimed it another triumph of her voice, but Daniel Mendelsohn, writing in *New York* magazine, found it to be overambitious, attributing its weakness to a common conceptual problem that writers fall into with second novels. The main character is simply “not a character you’re necessarily very interested in,” Mendelsohn writes. “Nor, more to the point, does McCracken seem to be—though she tries mightily to liven up the proceedings . . . What’s wrong with this overeventful but oddly inconsequential book (though let’s be clear—there’s plenty that’s right) is what’s typically wrong with sophomore novels: Overstuffed, overambitious, it tries too hard for too much. But that overabundance in itself suggests that there’s much more to come.” Even this unenthusiastic review, however, falls in line with most of McCracken’s critics by acknowledging in the end that “McCracken’s act is one that every lover of serious fiction should follow.”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and English literature. In the following essay, he examines the techniques that McCracken uses to elevate the character of Aunt Helen Beck to legendary status.

In “Here’s Your Hat What’s Your Hurry,” Elizabeth McCracken introduces Aunt Helen Beck, an unforgettable character so clearly realized that most readers, like the characters whose lives she invades in the story, will find themselves feeling a vague sense of familiarity with her. She seems like a family member or an echo of a character from another work of literature. This is not to say that there is anything at all unoriginal about Aunt Helen Beck: on the contrary, the sense of familiarity that clings to her is precisely because McCracken has created her with such specific details that she seems strikingly authentic. She speaks her mind even at the risk of upsetting her hosts, taking advantage of the fact that the small, residual respect for elders that still exists in modern society will make them go easy on her. She laughs and loses her patience sometimes, and at others she is touched by the simplicity of the lives lived by her purported nephew Ford and his wife Chris, a couple at least two generations removed from her own. It is true that McCracken knows how to form a well-rounded and amusing character and that any of the story’s other three characters could be the basis for a good story, but Aunt Helen Beck stands alone. In a story that is wonderfully evocative of reality, Aunt Helen Beck is something more important than it all: she is legendary.

Understanding readers' assumptions might just be McCracken’s greatest gift as a writer, which, given her control of language, her skill at innovation, and her understanding of eccentric personalities, is certainly saying a lot.

Just how McCracken goes about making a legend out of her character is no secret. In the story’s opening paragraphs, she gives generalizations about the woman, speaking about her the same way others have spoken about her at different times and places. Readers are told, for instance, that the following circumstances prevailed at many different homes—that she slept on sofas that were too short for her and subsequently kicked over lamps; that she dictated to children letters to deceased acquaintances; that she spoke about dead, morbid, three-named poets; that she talked about the purse that she had carried for sixty-five years and claimed that it had two pennies inside. As if it were not enough to paint a portrait of the woman with these details, McCracken also uses these early paragraphs to illustrate her situation: she is obviously a woman who has the time and patience to spend with children, which is not something that one would consider obvious when she later becomes a somewhat stern confidante of Mercury, the boy who lives in the nearby trailer. Also, she has been traveling around for so long that the children of people who knew her as children can become acquainted with her anew. This longevity and her association with children, the most imaginative members of society, are the perfect ingredients for achieving legendary status.

But there is one other element to her elevation from well-written character to legend, and that is the fact that McCracken continually affirms some of the details that have been told about her, while leaving other details to speculation. In doing this, she allows readers the thrill of discovery, of connecting those facts dictated in the early part of the story with details played out in front of their eyes as Aunt Helen Beck goes about her daily life. This interplay between things gossiped about her and things that are verifiably true gives the story life. It also broadens the story with each specific detail: seeing the things that are true about her and knowing that there are other details that are left undemonstrated, readers are seduced into believing that just about anything about her can be true.

For example, she dictates letters to the dead. On the second page of the story, McCracken describes a scene that has presumably been played out repeatedly, with young children who feel mixed emotions (they are “terrified of the enormous old lady on the sofa,” but they love scribbling her words) about interacting with this woman whose reason for being in their house is, in itself, a mystery. It is only one sentence, but it is a memorable one, and McCracken even starts it with “After a while,” to make readers aware of the overarching scope of this development. After a while, when she is settled into the house, Aunt Helen Beck dictates one of these letters to Mercury, the child of the particular household where she is staying. Readers have a chance to see the story’s early narration confirmed. McCracken’s gift is that she does not dwell on this structural device: readers hardly have time to think about how Mercury is becoming a member of something, a society of dozens of children who have had the benefit of Aunt Helen Beck’s company over the decades. Readers are more focused on the immediate details of the scene, such as “Mac” identity, the trouble arose between Mac and Aunt Helen Beck, and of course Mercury’s limited, if enthusiastic, literacy.

Only some of the rituals that Aunt Helen Beck is said to observe actually show up during her stay with Ford and Chris and Mercury. She does, as the narrator explains in that opening passage, have a change purse that she has carried with her for years, and she does give molasses to children, because she believes it is good for them. There are other details that do not materialize throughout the course of the story, though. There is no incident in which she knocks over any lamp by sleeping on a short sofa. She never directly talks about any three-named, morbid poets—the poem about goblins that she relates to Mercury could well be James Whitcomb Riley’s “Nine Little Goblins,” but that is never stated.

For the sake of building her legend, the details that are left to the imagination are just as important as the ones that are dramatized in the immediate story. The life of Aunt Helen Beck is so amazing, so varied, that it would be too much to ask for a reader to want each one of these claims to manifest itself in this stay. It would be too formulaic: instead of appreciating Aunt Helen Beck and the others for their interesting, flexible personalities, the story would turn into a seek-and-find puzzle. As it is, the reference to Riley’s goblin poem might already be too specific: so much is made of him in the introduction, with the flowers that young Helen Beck presented to him and his drunkenness, that bringing him up later would, unlike the molasses and the letters to the dead, confer upon him an importance that he does not really have in the story.

McCracken avoids this mistake by leaving his name out of it. Readers can guess, at the mention of Aunt Helen Beck's reciting a poem, that it is probably by someone morbid who has three names, but the story does not say so, leaving it to be assumed without forcing the issue.

Understanding readers' assumptions might just be McCracken's greatest gift as a writer, which, given her control of language, her skill at innovation, and her understanding of eccentric personalities, is certainly saying a lot. In creating a legendary character such as Aunt Helen Beck, the author has to know which parts of her life to leave a mystery and which parts readers will feel the need to know. It is common for writers to get the balance wrong: to tell too much or to withhold too much. For instance, readers are eventually told why Georgie Beck was so important to this woman that she would spin her whole long life off her fabricated relationship to him: he is the one person in her life who she felt truly loved her. Readers can, therefore, see why the change purse, which he made and is a symbol of him, would be so very important to her. But why does it have two cents? Readers really do not need to know the answer to that question to understand this story, and McCracken understands that sometimes it is better to leave loose ends loose.

If all of the fascinating details about Aunt Helen Beck's life were explained by the end of this story, she would not be a legendary character, just a well-rendered one who behaves according to the currents of her past life. That would not do. This woman has lived a life of mystery, showing up on people's doorsteps and passing as a relative when she is in fact a stranger: it is a life that can only be followed by leaving some questions unanswered and, even more importantly, by making readers forget that they even have questions. Aunt Helen Beck has a talent for casting a spell over her hosts so that they enjoy the richness of her personality and then enjoy even more the things that they do not know about her. Elizabeth McCracken has the same skill, making her something of a legend herself.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Find a picture of a person from a hundred years ago or more. Write a short story that explains this person as a distant relative of yours, including details about real relatives that would make your story sound factual to people who know you.

• Contact a social services provider and interview the people there about what they would do with an unattached homeless woman like Aunt Helen Beck. Record your specific questions and the answers you receive, and then write your recommendation about how Aunt Helen Beck should be convinced to apply for social help.

• In the story, Ford makes quinoa, which he refers to as “the grain of the ancient Aztecs.” Research the diets of the Aztecs, and find out how important quinoa was to their balanced nutrition. Then prepare an Aztec meal.

• Aunt Helen Beck writes letters to old acquaintances who are dead: research two methods that people have used to communicate with the dead, and write a story that incorporates one of these methods.

• This story ends with Aunt Helen Beck and Mercury leaving for unnamed places. Compare this conclusion to the ending of Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*, which many consider to be the great American novel. In what ways do the two endings imply the same things? In which ways do they symbolize different destinies for their characters?

What Do I Read Next?

• Critics praised Elizabeth McCracken's first novel, *The Giant's House*, which was published in 1997. The plot concerns interesting characters in circumstances as innovative as they are in this story: a lonely librarian in a small town falls in love with a boy fourteen years younger than she and stays true to him as he grows to nearly nine feet tall.

• The loose border between reality and fantasy that McCracken flirts with in this story is pushed further in Michael Paterniti's *Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip across America with Einstein's Brain* (2000). Paterniti's book chronicles an actual journey across the country in a Buick Skylark, with the brain of Albert Einstein, which was removed from Einstein's body upon his death in 1955, and the aged pathologist who removed it.

• McCracken's style and literary sensibilities have often been compared to those of Ron Carlson. Carlson's collection of stories *Plan B for the Middle Class* includes a varied selection of tales about ordinary people reaching middle age and wondering about their lives. Published in 1992, about the same year that McCracken's *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, this collection is available in a reprint edition from Penguin Press.

• Elizabeth McCracken has clearly drawn inspiration for part of this story from another writer who was just as inventive and just as strongly associated with the Iowa Writers' Workshop: Flannery O'Connor. Her 1949 novel *Wise Blood* includes a young street-corner preacher trying to outrun his guilt and the conniving world of would-be religious figures surrounding him.

• Mary Karr, a college professor, poet, and critic, published a memoir in 1995 about her childhood in east Texas called *The Liar's Club*. The events of her life are scarcely believable, loaded with alcoholism, abuse, gunplay, and reckless spending; despite the serious nature of the events, though, Karr writes with an unfailing sense of humor and appreciation of humanity that matches McCracken's own.

• Readers of this story may gain a better appreciation of Aunt Helen Beck by reading the works of one of the poets whom she identifies as being morbid and three-named. James Whitcomb Riley is seldom remembered anymore, but in the early decades of the twentieth century most schoolchildren in the country were familiar with at least a few of his poems. They are collected in Indiana Press's 1993 volume *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley*.

Further Study

Felder, Leonard, *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People: Surviving Your Family and Keeping Your Sanity*, Rodale Press, 2005.

Felder's analysis of family dynamics, especially in relationship to extended families that span several generations, apply aptly to the interactions that take place between Aunt Helen Beck, Ford and Chris, and Mercury.

Ford, Charles V., *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!! The Psychology of Deceit*, American Psychiatric Publishing, 1999.

Despite its overexcited title, this is actually a very scholarly work on what makes people like Aunt Helen Beck live their lives deliberately trying to mislead others. Even so, it is written with a tinge of humor that renders its lessons in a way that anyone can appreciate and understand.

Gaines, Stephen, *Marjoe: The Life and Times of Marjoe Gortner*, Harper & Rowe, 1973.

This is the biography of a man who became an ordained Pentecostal preacher at the age of four, lived an early life of a con man, and became a movie star as an adult. His life story gives insight into the type of life that Georgie Beck may have lived and the type of man he may have become if he had survived his childhood illness.

Thompson, Tim, and Eric Scigliano, *Puget Sound: Sea between the Mountains*, Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 2000.

This book combines artistic photos and lyric prose to give readers a sense of the natural and cultural ambience of the area where this story takes place.

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Ingraham, Janet, “Word of Mouth,” in *Library Journal*, Vol. 118, No. 19, 1993, p. 128.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535