His Little Women Short Guide

His Little Women by Judith Rossner

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Contents

His Little Women Short Guide..1

Contents..2

Characters..3

Social Concerns..6

Themes...8

Key Questions...10

Literary Precedents..12

Related Titles...13

Copyright Information..14

Characters

Just as in Alcott's Little Women, Rossner's book establishes the second daughter as the solid center of the action. Nell is presented as the most balanced character, avoiding the excesses of feminism, low self-esteem, or loss of self-control that plague the other characters. From the beginning she acknowledges her father as the "sole light of my life." Her attraction to Hugo, Saul, and Jack Campbell are only momentary diversions, and even Shimmy satisfies her mainly because through him she can preserve a bit of her father and rediscover herself. She loved Tony, her mother's second husband, who was a true father to her, who taught her a love of opera, and who even eclipsed her real father for a time. On the whole, so long as she has a secure base in a father's love, she is a happy, self-reliant woman.

Louisa, her older half-sister, is less secure, for she has been fatherless most of her life. At first she appears cynical and emotionally unattached to her father, but the truth soon becomes clear — she is in deadly competition with Nell to be his favorite daughter. Much later, when preparing for the Jack Campbell trial, she reveals her true feelings to Ronald Chow: "I was an only child. Then my father left us and had another daughter . . . I knew who he was, and it turned out I could find him in the movie magazines. So now I had a father. And I had a baby sister.

Half sister. The . . . little brat had my father, and I hated her!" As Nell and Louisa get to know each other, this childish hate is replaced by feelings more complex, and Louisa sometimes truly loves her sister, but the competition is never far beneath the surface.

Louisa rejected her first child, a son, but welcomes her daughter, fathered by a sexy Australian bartender, and provides her with a loving home. The daughter, Penny, becomes Sam's fifth little woman and achieves for Louisa the closeness with her father she always craved. Penny eclipses them all as the new "girl" in Sam's life. Louisa's success as a novelist is important to her, but what she wants most is her father's praise of her work. After his death she is still seeking his approval, and so she writes False Light with a single purpose in mind: "The most important adult in my life has died and with his death I need to tell the truth about events seen in a false light in my fiction."

Sonny and Liane, the third and fourth daughters, seem to know they have lost the fight for their father's affections from the start. As children they have his love, but Louisa and Nell appear on the scene when the little girls are six and three, and the younger pair is immediately supplanted. They develop into empty shells, Sonny at seventeen doing "a lot of dope" and "screwing around in such a way that the rest of the world had to be aware of what she was doing" and Liane, at fourteen, "ravishingly beautiful but also incredibly dumb and utterly selfabsorbed." Sonny cares about no one but their housekeeper Estella, who disowns the family over Louisa's first book, A Servant's Diary, and refuses to return. A few years later, Sonny commits suicide in a final bid for Estella's attention, and her sister Liane drifts into a commune and is soon forgotten.

The sisterhood in this book is not limited to just Sam Pearlstein's four daughters. A sisterhood of Sam's wives and lovers, consisting of Esther, Violet, Lynn, Dagmar, and Clara, also forms, and, once they begin to support one another, they become remarkably close.

On the whole, except for Nell's mother, Violet, they are negligible women, eclipsed by their famous husband who, as Nell once put it, had a "way of moving through life as though each new group of people had been sent by Central Casting and could be replaced at will without anguish."

Sam Pearlstein himself is a remarkably attractive character. His women's love for him is believable, even though on an objective basis, he has been far from a model husband and father. An incident that occurred when Nell was five best illustrates his warmth and his capacity to love. Nell wanted desperately to see snow, so when a storm was predicted in New York, Sam had her nurse, Peg, fly her in from California for the occasion. That memory of being held by her father as "he stepped down from the curb, took seveal steps, gave [her] a kiss, and whispered 'Hey sunshine, look up at the sky'" sustains her through many lonely moments in the years ahead. Sam is similarly kind to both Nell and Violet when Tony dies, patient with Lynn during her difficulties, and an adoring grandfather to Penny. Sam Pearlstein is known in Hollywood as a powerful man, but as he reveals to Nell, he is a vulnerable and sensitive man, too. When she says his new face after cosmetic surgery "scares" her, he explains that "the rest of the world doesn't love me like you do, and the way I looked then was what was scaring everyone." As he approaches retirement, he becomes less and less sure of who he is and thinks back lovingly to his forgotten origins as a Jewish boy in New York. To his daughters, especially after his death, he has no flaws and grows larger than life, but the man himself has a touching humility that makes him human.

The other male characters in the book are of two types — the seducers, such as Teddy and Hugo, who are quickly dismissed, and the father types, such as Tony and Shimmy, who are capable of great warmth. Even Jack Campbell, for his spontaneous kindness to Nell on the day Tony's will was read, places himself among the fatherly group despite his later questionable activities. The men in His Little Women seem more capable of nurturing than the females. This is particularly true of Shimmy, who loves to take care of Nell. By finally accepting Shimmy's offer of a life together, Nell opens herself to the possibility of father and lover in a single person. As her father's closest associate, "whose force of personality is as great as my father's was," Shimmy allows Nell the freedom to love without being untrue to the man who will always be the "light of my life." Techniques His Little Women is a frame narrative — a lawyer recounting the story of her father and sisters, one of whom, in turn, is also recounting the same story in a series of loosely autobiographical novels. Further complexity is introduced by the fact that there is a libel lawsuit arising from one of the sister's books and another libel lawsuit being defended by the narrator. As a final reminder of the frame within a frame, the narrator self-consciously addresses the reader at the close of the novel to plead for a favorable reading of her book.

The novel is not without its technical flaws, and critics have been quick to point them out. One reviewer characterized the novel as "laboriously contrived, rambling and lacking momentum." Another, while generally pleased with the book, is annoyed when Rossner "gets on her polemic high horse."

Although the plot does get bogged down in the middle of the novel and Rossner's style is occasionally awkward and convoluted, the novel has definite strengths. Rossner makes skillful use of dramatic juxtaposition to foreshadow connections between seemingly unrelated details, particularly in her insertion of excerpts and synopses of Louisa's novels into the narrative. This has the effect of highlighting particular attitudes or observations about women or commenting on actions in the main plot line. She also does an admirable job of taking her readers inside Nell's mind through skillful management of the time line and frequent changes in style and voice to signal shifts in her mode of thinking.

Social Concerns

H is Little Women, loosely based on Louisa May Alcott's classic, Little Women (1868-1869), is a contemporary treatment of the themes of sisterhood and daughterhood. Instead of being part of a stable family centered on a mother in the Alcott mold, Rossner's four sisters are set adrift by parents who are themselves coming apart. Sam Pearlstein, their charismatic father, has had three wives, each of whom he has left, abandoning his daughters at crucial moments in their young lives. His Little Women centers on the two older girls, Louisa and Nell, who meet for the first time at ages twenty-seven and seventeen at the funeral of Nell's second father, Tony. At that point Louisa has already abandoned her own young son to come to California in a bid for her father's love, and Nell soon embarks on a parallel quest. In their search for Sam's love and approval, they highlight a number of the social concerns of our decade: the role of women and their relationship to each other in the aftermath of women's liberation, the enduring worth of tradition and family in an unstable world, the destructive power of low self-esteem, and the lifelong need for parental love and support. Because both Louisa and Nell are writers, the story also explores the novelist's craft, most specifically the relationships between fact and fiction, between real people and fictional characters, and the dilemma that these tensions pose in today's litigious environment.

His Little Women suggests, at the least, an ambivalence toward the achievements of the women's movement in the United States. Some reviewers have termed the novel a "revisionist indictment" of the women's movement. In the novel Nell struggles between her admiration of a woman's independence and her personal need for comfort and support. As a young girl, mainly in reaction to Violet's inability to make a life for herself and her daughter, Nell develops contempt for women who are not self-reliant.

Violet's insecurity is made tangible through her doll Mooty, which she has had since childhood and is "unwilling to let out of her sight." Nell thinks the attachment is silly and immature, yet years later, when she sees the doll in Violet's bag at the memorial service after Sam's death, she has a very different response; "I began crying," she writes, "and didn't stop for days. Or was it months."

The modern woman is expected to have it all and do it all: successful career, loving relationships, intellect, sensuality, and self-esteem. The promise of the women's movement seems to have gone slightly sour, however. Nell, while "liberated" by her career and the escape from her first marriage, hesitates to embrace a strong feminist position, especially "the humorlessness that went hand in hand with its militant posture, with its failure to acknowledge complexity, contradiction, and paradox." Eventually she puts aside her law career for a love relationship with Shimmy, a sixty-three-year-old friend of her father's who woos and wins her.

Louisa, too, while considered a spokesperson for feminism in her writing, backs off from a strong feminist stance in her personal life as she comes to realize that the sisterhood espoused by the women's movement really goes against human nature, since, as she

says, "if most girls purely and simply love their sisters, I don't know about it." In her opinion, women do not want to "overthrow men" but just to "make them behave."

As Rossner's heroines are backing off from feminism in this book, however, minor characters such as Violet (Sam's second wife), Lynn (Sam's third wife), and Dagmar (Sam's one-time mistress) are just discovering it. They join a women's support group and become the best of friends. Violet matures and admits that she "had never dreamed what a comfort women could be."

Dagmar thrives in this new sisterhood also and seems more beautiful than ever. Lynn's transformation, however, is a disaster. Immersed in her new life, she rejects her former one entirely, turning to drugs and sex, and abandoning her daughters to a life of the same.

Eventually she recovers somewhat, but her daughters are lost, one to suicide and the other to drugs.

Such abandonment of responsibility in favor of hedonistic pleasure is a repeated tragedy in the novel. Lack of self-esteem has been a problem for many of Rossner's characters, most notably for Theresa Dunn in Looking for Mr. Goodbar (1975), and most try to escape reality through alcohol, drugs, sexual promiscuity, or other excesses.

In His Little Women, the entire I-Land operation, the self-destructive lifestyles of Sonny and Liane, the seduction of all four daughters by the repulsive Hugo, the temptation and downfall of Jack Campbell, and even Louisa's and Nell's brief drunken indiscretions all highlight the emptiness and dangers of such behavior. Eventually, even Sam, who generally seems so in control of his life, destroys himself as the result of an eating and drinking binge he cannot control no matter how much those he loves try to stop him.

Themes

In His Little Women, the traditional values of love and family give people the strength they need to survive. The longing for parental love and approval is at the heart of His Little Women, as the title itself underscores. Despite Sam's absence from large parts of Nell's and Louisa's youth, he is the focus of all they do. Some critics have suggested that Rossner claims that women seek only their father's love and nothing else. Louisa and Nell compete for that love, and while at times it binds them together, it also sets them at odds. The drive for parental accep tance is so strong that Louisa abandons her own son to get it, seemingly oblivious to the irony of her actions. Most of the characters' problems as adults seem to stem from the absence or doubt of parental love. Violet, having lost her parents in the war, suffers through a lifetime of non-personhood; Sonny, alienated from her parents, commits suicide when she is rejected by Estella as well; Nell loses her father three times — first Sam, then Tony, then Sam again — and longs at the end to find a reasonable substitute in Shimmy.

All the characters seem to be searching for the elusive "real thing," and at the end it seems to be found in traditional morality and family ties, not careers or sensual pleasure or the women's movement. Eventually, even Sam finds that Hollywood success cannot satisfy him, and his final longings are for his humbler roots — his grandfather Moishe, the Jewish foods of his childhood, a concerned and loving wife (thus his proposal to the plain but caring nurse Clara). After Sam's death, the void inside Nell is unbearable. She feels, although she has "a perfectly good life," that she lacks the personhood to enjoy that life. Deep in despair, she rediscovers Shimmy and his daughter, whom she has known all her life, and recognizes that these people do, in fact, "have a life." As she comes to know Shimmy better, first as friend and then lover, she concludes that his strength comes from what she has been denied — years of "domestic bliss" and the stability, as he puts it, of "coming home at night to the familiar." The book ends with Nell abandoning her high-powered life as a lawyer to allow time for these simpler pursuits.

Important though all these relationships are in Rossner's book, they cannot eclipse an almost equally important issue for Rossner's characters and for Rossner herself — understanding the process by which fiction is created.

Louisa and Nell discover that the writer's craft has far-reaching effects. Not only can a writer be sued for the stories she creates but, even more significantly, the writing becomes a major issue in family relationships. As Nell puts it, "fiction can be enjoyed in inverse relationship to one's proximity to the author." The subplot involving Jack Campbell's lawsuit against Louisa is not very important in itself — his is obviously a tenuous case at best — but for what it allows Rossner to reveal of her own doubts and concerns as a writer. Events "that might well have happened" seem as real as those that actually did. Rossner herself once admitted in an interview that "it's much more difficult for me to set down unaltered fact. I worry terribly that I'm not getting each detail exactly right. In fiction, I make the details." On another occasion she said, "I have the absolute urge to bend reality to my own needs."

In His Little Women, Louisa seems to speak directly for Rossner regarding these issues. The characters, settings, and details in Louisa's book, Joe Stalbin's Daughters, are all amalgams of people and places she has known, and the uncanny parallels between her Jack and the real Jack Campbell are just coincidences that have arisen from totally unrelated details from Louisa's own life. Louisa is clearly innocent of libel, and her acquittal allows Rossner to express herself on an issue that is obviously important to her. Ronald Chow, Louisa's lawyer, states her message most eloquently in his summary statement: "We need to read wonderful stories as much as authors need to tell them. We need authors' flights of fancy because we want to soar with them out of everyday life and into realms the imagination makes interesting. We will not have places to go with our writers if their flights are grounded because the weather in the courts has grown dangerous."

As His Little Women ends, Louisa has written a new book, False Light, in which she means to tell only the truth.

Nell observes that "for all Joe Stalbin's Daughters being labeled as fiction its characters are more recognizable to me than the ones in False Light." She then concludes, "I've come to think there is some complicity between reader and author in an account that makes no claim to the truth. My task in picking up]oe Stalbin's Daughters is to forget that it has anything to do with reality.

While my task in reading False Light is to remember. It goes without saying that I would like the reader to regard my own account as an exception to this truth."

Key Questions

His Little Women stands alone very well, but discussion groups may find that a reading of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women will further enhance their appreciation and insight into Rossner's book. The emphasis in both books is on family, particularly on the bonds between sisters, and this is an important theme to pursue in discussion. Equally intriguing is the whole idea of artistic creation — what fiction is, how it relates to "truth," how a writer uses the people and experiences he or she knows in his or her work, and how a writer's awareness of potential audiences can affect the final product.

1. Is Sam Pearlstein a good father?

Do you find him to be an attractive character? Why or why not?

2. The mothers all seem to be eclipsed by Sam in their daughters' eyes. Explain why this is so, given the fact that Sam was absent for most of their lives and they were largely raised by their mothers.

3. Louisa and Nell are half-sisters by blood, but they are just getting to know each other as adults. What are the essential qualities that make sisters "sisters"? Are those qualities present here?

4. Discuss the importance of roots.

What made Sam suddenly long for the Jewish past he had discarded during his years of building success in Hollywood?

5. Justify Nell's attraction to Shimmy. What needs does he fill? Is the relationship likely to last?

6. Women have been traditionally valued as nurturers, as sex objects, and, more recently, as people in their own right. How would you categorize the various women in this book? Which role seems to bring greatest satisfaction? What attitudes toward women's liberation are suggested?

7. What is the significance of I-Land?

Is it just a minor interlude or an integral part of the story?

8. Louisa's books seem to headline a series of messages about women, each stance reflecting what is happening in Louisa's real life at the time. Discuss the conflicting messages about women presented in her books, beginning with A Servant's Diary. What do these books add to our understanding of Louisa as a person?

9. Nell's final statement about truth and reality as they relate to writing is cryptic: "My task in picking up Joe Stilbin's Daughters is to forget that it has anything to do with reality. While my task in reading False Light is to remember. It goes without saying

thatwould like the reader to regard my own account as an exception to this truth." What does Rossner mean? What happens when a writer writes about his or her own experience? How can we distinguish between "truth" and "fiction"? Should we try?

10. Louisa May Alcott's Little Women is a nineteenth-century classic — sentimental, moralistic, and very popular with readers. In what ways does Rossner's book mirror the original? Does the connection strengthen the book?

Literary Precedents

In many ways His Little Women is more reminiscent of the literary conventions of Louisa May Alcott's time than the present. The occasionally preachy moral tone and the doubling of narrator as self-conscious author are both typical of pre-modernist novels.

The publishers correctly label the book "as romantic as a Victorian novel," with its surprisingly happy-ever-after ending, followed by a proper epilogue to let the reader know how all the characters fared in the "future."

The plot and characterization of His Little Women reflects Rossner's nineteenth-century models in numerous ways. Her opening quotation of a letter by Papa March from Little Women suggests the most significant one — that Sam's girls, like Mr. March's, must conduct themselves like "little women" while he is away so that he may return "fonder and prouder than ever of my little women." The circumstances are very different — Papa March is off in the Civil War, not moving from family to family, and Mrs. March is a strong, supportive mother, not a series of women of limited mothering skills — yet Alcott's and Rossner's girls share many of the same roles and personality traits. Like Nell, Alcott's Jo is the voice of the book, the writer, the "old maid" career woman, who does not marry until later and then to an intellectual almost fifteen years her senior. Alcott's Meg, the oldest, is, like Louisa, the "little mother" of the family, the first to provide her father with grandchildren, but she is far more taken with domestic life than Louisa will ever be.

Beth, Alcott's third daughter, is frail and dependent; she dies young, the darling of the family, having never regained her strength after a childhood bout with scarlet fever. Rossner's Sonny, too, dies young, but this time for lack of love and at her own hand. Alcott's Amy, like Liane, is the youngest and prettiest, artistic and sociable.

Liane resembles her with her striking blonde features and physical attractiveness, but in place of Amy's kind and charming (if often self-centere) personality, Liane's spirit is vapid and empty. The Pearlstein daughters, like the March girls, must be dutiful, brave, and strong during their father's many absences. Louisa and Nell must also be "little women" about his death, able to carry on and eventually, as grown girls, to "live a reasonable life unrelated to him."

Related Titles

Rossner's characters in His Little Women suffer from the same fears and insecurities that have troubled her previous characters — the longing for love, the fear of loss, and the need for self-reliance and a positive self-image.

However, these characters choose different means of coping with these difficulties and have varying degrees of success in overcoming them.

Rossner's central characters always seem to lose their home support early in life: Theresa Dunn's favorite brother died at eighteen and devastated the family (Looking for Mr. Goodbar); Nadine's parents were killed in her youth in a freak swimming pool accident (Attachments, 1977); Dawn's mother committed suicide and her father drowned before her second birthday (August, 1983); and Nell's father left home and her mother never really took an interest in her (His Little Women).

Dealing with these losses is a lifetime preoccupation for Rossner's characters.

His Little Women is different from Rossner's previous novels in a major way — the central character is able to cope while relying not on sex (Theresa) or marriage (Nadine) or a symbiotic relationship (Lulu and Dawn) but on herself. In August, Rossner's faith in the feminist conception of the sisterhood of women reaches its height, and men seem almost negligible.

His Little Women takes a step backward from this feminist position. Rossner's sisters here are only half-sisters, not only by blood but also in terms of their capacity for friendship. Rossner suggests that feminine instincts will let sisterhood go only so far before rivalries and frictions make women step back from each other. While one can be bolstered by family and friends, each person owes it to herself to "have a life." Nell achieves satisfaction neither through sex nor talking out her problems, but through the self-therapy offered by her writing. Louisa does the same. Although Nell needs the help and support of Shimmy to get her through a difficult time after her father's death, the implication is clear that self-reliance is an attainable goal.

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