How Stella Got Her Groove Back Short Guide

How Stella Got Her Groove Back by Terry Mcmillan

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Contents

Characters

Stella is an unusual figure because she is a remarkably successful woman, and an African-American woman. She maintains high interracial appeal as she circulates among a largely African-American cast of characters. Stella is attractive, witty, highspirited, and easy for a reader to enjoy.

After a childhood that was less than ideal, Stella found a way to acquire advanced academic degrees. She is intelligent and talented, which she demonstrates by her work in investments and then in furniture design. Her fine sense of individuality and beauty are expressed in gardening and, at last, in her art. She is interested "in the texture of things, in creating harmony where there was none before, in making the impossible possible, reversing the irrevocable." Stella is upbeat, with very contemporary tastes. She prepares for her vacation by getting a nineties hairdo comprised of "at least a hundred little braids."

As a woman, Stella revels in her power.

Her athleticism is one reflection of that quality. Stella likes to run "because it makes me feel I'm in control of my life."

For the same reason she neither smokes nor drinks alcoholic beverages. Stella makes it clear that she needs a man for love, not money. Even during a slump in spirits Stella acts decisively to revitalize herself. In Jamaica, she finds a fresh setting in which to do it. In Winston, a chef trainee, she finds the good looks and youthful sincerity that force her to rethink and re-prioritize her life. Winston is tall, attentive, shy and inclined to blush.

Unlike the men she is used to, he is unconcerned about "where I live or what kind of house I live in or how much money I make or what kind of car I drive." He speaks in a husky, smooth, lightly accented voice that "sounds like it's coming from an honest place inside him." He neither sounds nor thinks like he's twenty-one. Stella thinks that he is more poised than she.

Winston finds in Stella the one person he can talk to, someone who can make him laugh. "I don't have to pretend to be something that I'm not with you and you make me feel really good about being who I am." He is a willing lover, even interested in marriage, but Stella does not lightly disregard expectations for a woman her age. "I must be out of my middle-aged mind," she says; this is "wild and crazy." Her gift for Winston of the latest-style shoes sets Stella pondering that the "safest," the "smartest thing" would be for him to "walk away" in them. Such misgivings are vented to a parade of characters who rarely offer resistance to the affair. A notable feature of this novel is the ongoing inner struggle Stella conducts, rather than the usual, obvious conflict among characters. Minor ones like artist friend Maisha, the AfricanAmerican tourists Patrice and Tonya, and trainer Krystal merely echo the arguments of major figures, and some readers might be inclined to wonder about repetition.

The main approving character is Vanessa, the likable, youngest sister with a nineties attitude. She is outspoken, generous, fickle, and needy enough to ask Stella for money. Vanessa has a deceased husband, a daughter Quincy's age, and a current relationship with an unwell man old enough to be their father. Vanessa is eager to know how her sister could; look so happy after a week's vacation. After all, Stella has lost her job. And Vanessa has wrecked Stella's fancy car. "I wouldn't worry too much about what anybody says," Vanessa advises, based on. the double standard that men date younger women all the time. "You should take whatever form happiness comes in when it comes your way." Middle sister Angela, on the other hand, is a staid subdivision wife who provides the rare, noticeable arguments for the proprieties. Angela has a twenty-year-old son from a previous marriage and a corporate-lawyer spouse who has gotten her pregnant. She is predictable, and "feels like nothing without a man."

One of the novel's most defining conversations takes place between Angela and Stella. "Don't tell me," Angela says, "you've decided that the corporate world is empty and offers no spiritual mental or emotional gratification." She mocks the notion of an inner search for something "more creative and fulfilling." She calls it a nervous breakdown, a midlife crisis, the throwaway of a career over some boy who just wants to become an American citizen. "This is not just about him" Stella explains. "I've been doing everything according to the book for so long that I didn't see how I've been living like I'm in a cocoon or something." Angela persists.

"And how about being a father to Quincy, have you thought about that?" Stella says she needs a man for love, not an anchor, and denies she has an exalted sense of herself. "Then why can't you act your age?" Angela asks. "Like a fortytwo-year-old woman," she adds.

As for Winston and Quincy, Angela need not have worried. "Age ain't nothing but a number," Quincy says. "It's only a problem if you make it a problem." Like Vanessa and Angela, Quincy is one of the novel's best drawn characters.

He is a normal, active adolescent who cares about splashing in the pool with his friends, playing the latest games, adopting the newest fashions. He grows an Afro, gets his ear pierced. Stella prides herself on being a responsible, good mother. Her son is her best buddy. He returns her love and talks frankly to her on any subject. Stella is determined to raise him to be "a strong proud and confident black man who knows his own worth and value and is not afraid to love and show his feelings." Quincy welcomes Winston into the home. In the end, Aunt Angela does too.

Social Concerns

H ow Stella Got Her Groove Back explores the question of how to get back one's stride or "groove" when the solution conflicts with social custom. The central character, also the narrator, is Stella Payne, a 1990s West Coast securities analyst for an investment bank. Stella is forty-two years old, divorced, and the mother of an eleven-year-old son named Quincy. She begins her tale with Quincy's departure to visit his father in Colorado, which frees her to "try to do some make-Stella- feel- good stuff." Life for Stella lacks "fizz." Her marriage failed three years ago, and she has not had "a legitimate date in almost a year." Her beloved best girlfriend has died. "Loss is hard. Starting over is hard." Stella opts suddenly for a vacation in Jamaica, to get away from everything and everybody. She finds instead Winston Shakespeare, a Jamaican man half her age. They fall in love.

Typically McMillan does not engage her novels in feminist or racial polemics, and her emphasis here is on Stella's inner struggle against the social convention that a May-December romance should involve a dominant older man, a younger woman.

McMillan's Stella is nonetheless grounded in a strong sense of authoritative womanhood, African-American dignity, and sensitivity to the historical oppression of blacks by whites. On the beach, olive-brown Stella sunbathes to get as dark as possible, and wishes she had been "born blacker, like the proud Africans I love to look at in my big photography books on the coffee table at home." She rejects the nude sunbathing her resort offers, because "I wouldn't want to give white men the pleasure of seeing my black body considering they used to rape us when we were slaves."

Stella circulates easily among her predominantly white fellow vacationers, a clear indication that she understands her own worth. "I basically like most white people as long as they don't act like Nazis or come across like they're superior or richer or classier or smarter." Stella is more concerned with degeneration in the African-American community, and her Jamaican adventures give her opportunities to reflect. She marvels at the safety in Jamaica, the happy amusements of children. "Nothing will hurt you here," a local guide says. Anyone, any age, can hitch a ride home "any time of night and still feel safe and nobody ever gets raped or shot or robbed." Stella remembers when African-Americans, too, could trust each other, and when their neighborhoods were safe.

Stella regrets the fact that times have changed. She lives in a mostly white neighborhood because she does not want "to get shot on a whim," and because the best schools, the most qualified teachers, can be found there. "I want my son to get the best free education available" so that he can survive in college, in society at large. She does not believe "the stereotype that all black neighborhoods are dangerous and crime-ridden." Still she thinks that a lot of them are on their way thanks to gangs, guns, "heroin, no fathers in the house, mothers trying too hard to do it all and failing," no authority, and no role models.

While life in Jamaica seems idyllic in comparison, Stella is depressed by the living conditions she sees in places. Families live in huts, perhaps without running water or other utilities. "I've got old photos of my grandparents sitting out on their front porches in front of rickety little shacks identical to these. I hate those pictures." Her grandparents look worn out. Stella herself, and two sisters Vanessa and Angela, lived in the projects before a move to a suburb. The girls were teens when their father vanished. Later their mother was killed by a drunk driver who jumped the curb. In her family, Stella is the only one who has made it to the top. She can sympathize with the Jamaicans and tries to leave tips for services whenever she can. "This is like a black thang: You take care of me, I'll take care of you."

Stella is affluent, well able to spend the money. She overcame social obstacles, earned MBA and MFA degrees, and climbed the corporate ladder. She grew into an embodiment of social assumptions about success. Stella owns a splendid house with pool in the San Francisco Bay area and another property in Lake Tahoe. She drives a BMW, works out with a personal trainer, and has four computers in her office. Stella needs no man to empower her. It saddens her to think that "women still depend on a man to determine the quality of their lives and are still subjecting themselves to humiliation just to keep driving those fancy cars living in those humongous houses with rooms no one ever enters." At the same time, Stella dislikes the pressure that comes from earning over two hundred thousand dollars a year. Stella's story does not focus on victimization, but it says much about the universal need for truly loving, adult companionship and the interracial, social phenomenon of discontent in suburbia, or the emptiness of life at the corporate top.

Techniques

In How Stella Got Her Groove Back, McMillan sets herself the task of sustaining reader interest in a woman who already has it all, and who confronts scant conflict during the novel. McMillan does this through a first-person, presenttense, stream-of-consciousness narration.

It is marked by colloquialisms and occasional expletives, but also poetic imagery.

Winston makes Stella feel "like a breeze coming through an open window"; "my heart is ticking and he is helping me with the beats." The frequent sentences or paragraphs that flow freely without punctuation reinforce Stella's exuberant, independent personality and the pace of her life. The narration is warm, chatty, and authentic in its presentation of AfricanAmerican and girlfriend-to-girlfriend talk.

Scenes of dialogue are frequent and snappy. The "now" flavor of the narrative is supported by frequent references to brand- name products and to famous names in popular culture. McMillan is known for her humor, and at one point she describes Stella's reaction to her own novel Waiting to Exhale. "I don't know what all the hoopla is about," Stella remarks, and "why everybody thinks she's such a hot writer."

Critics generally agree that another of McMillan's strengths is the vividness of her characters. While certain critics see an undeveloped or unrealistic quality in this story, McMillan admits she drew heavily upon her own life. Like Stella, McMillan is in her forties, attractive, and wealthy.

From a previous relationship she also has a son, her buddy, on whom she patterned Quincy. McMillan reached a personal and creative low ebb after the deaths of her mother and a dear friend. Like Stella, she went to Jamaica. Winston is patterned on Jonathan Plummer, whom McMillan met there. Like Stella, McMillan soul-searched about a May- December romance in reverse, then decided to live with Plummer. The novel is dedicated to him.

Themes

Stella is on a quest for self-realization.

She dearly loves her son, but she is not especially lonely because he left to visit his father. Quincy's absence gives Stella the chance to take time off from motherhood and reflect on how to "shoot some vitality into my heart, my mind, this house of soul I live in." Her divorce has taken the "bite" out of her. She feels locked into a job that is dull and boring, and so high paying that she is constantly being appraised and worn out from trying to prove herself. Stella enjoys "making things that serve a purpose," but art is "iffy" when one has a mortgage.

The decision to leave for Jamaica is the first freeing step for Stella, since it overthrows the proprieties for women. "You mean to tell me you're gonna go all the way to a foreign country by yourself?"

her sister Angela asks. "What if somebody realizes you're alone and tries to take advantage of you?" Stella is quizzed in the van going to Negril. "You mean you're here all by your lonesome?" a woman marvels." Aren't you brave," another says. "I'd never dream of traveling anywhere like this alone." Even Winston, when Stella meets him, makes assumptions. "Where's your husband?" he inquires. "Did you come with your boyfriend?" Her initial break with convention brings Stella to the prospect of a liberating love, but getting past the hurdle that Winston has not yet turned twenty-one is hard to do. "He's a child," Stella tells herself at once, even if "a tall handsome sexy maple-syrup-colored" child. She wishes they had "this make and model" in her forties age group. She thinks that being drawn to a man so young is inappropriate.

Stella wrestles with that problem for the rest of the novel. While her struggle involves themes related to relationships— the search for love, the fear of commitment—and certainly midlife crisis and stagnation on the job, the overriding concern is acceptable behavior. Winston, informed of Stella's age at the outset, never develops qualms. "There is nothing illegal about this," he says, as they discuss their budding passion. When Stella reminds him that she is old enough to be his mother, he reassures her. "You don't look like my mother. You don't act like my mother." And again, "you should not be worrying at all about my age or your age because they are only numbers." As time goes by, through talks with sisters and others she tells, Stella is either encouraged or discouraged in the doubts she cannot shake. Her sister Vanessa reacts on the phone with "You go, girl!!!"

Sister Angela warns Stella against a tropical fling. What Stella herself knows for certain is that, before she leaves Jamaica, her groove is back.

"You look better now than I've seen you look in a long time," Vanessa says, after Stella arrives home. "I feel like, like I could plant every flower in the world in my backyard

today," Stella replies. Not even the sudden loss of her job can dispel the feeling. Because of Winston, Stella is able to turn to advantage the departmental downsizing that ousts her. "After all these years of making what I thought was an investment," she thinks ruefully at first, "it turns out there is no return."

Within minutes, she is on the verge of giggling. A gigantic burden has been lifted, an opportunity given to venture out in a different direction. Stella will accept her new circumstances "because what I am certain of is that for the first time in like seventeen years I am totally and unequivocally free!" She has been a wise investor in her own behalf and can manage financially until she finds her way.

Indeed, encouraged by her artist friend Maisha, Stella soon finds real potential in furniture design.

It takes Stella longer to resolve the question of Winston, or rather the fact that he is too young and makes her "feel like a rainbow." Stella misses him, phones him, sends him gifts, and visits Jamaica again with son Quincy. And Winston continues to pursue Stella. If a law exists, he says, that "anything good" has to make sense, "then let's just break it."

Finally Stella sends Winston the air fare to be with her. Her trainer Krystal is one who approves. "Follow your own heart and your own head and forget about what anybody says." This is the conclusion Stella draws. "I am happy," she says, when Winston arrives at the airport.

"And we are going home."

Adaptations

Based upon the popularity McMillan achieved with Waiting to Exhale, film rights to How Stella Got Her Groove Back were acquired for a seven-figure sum by Twentieth-Century Fox before the novel was released in 1996. In 1997 Angela Bassett, who played the part of Bernadine in Waiting to Exhale, agreed to star as Stella.

The casting pleased McMillan, who cowrote the screenplay. Although Stella retains her "groove," the film differs from the novel in the addition of clearcut conflict. Director Kevin Rodney Sullivan takes advantage of the beauty of his two leading co-stars including Taye Diggs as Winston in the 1998 film release to focus more on the sensuality of the lovers than on their inner emotional struggles. The soft-spoken Winston is the Jamaican Adonis who is perfect in nearly every way except for his brutally condescending mother. While in the island paradise the romance, and the sense of the characters flourish, but clearly Winston is not ready for Stella's highpressured, affluent life in San Francisco.

Consequently, his character does not develop as he withdraws from her superwoman role on the mainland.

The cast also includes Regina King as Vanessa, Whoopi Goldberg as Delilah, Suzanne Douglas as Angela, and Michael J. Pagan as Quincy.

In 1996, Penguin Audiobooks published an abridged version of the novel, comprised of two sound cassettes, read by McMillan. In 1996, Recorded Books published an unabridged edition, consisting of eight sound cassettes, read by Lynne Thigpen. An unabridged library edition was published in 1996 by Books on Tape, consisting of eight sound cassettes, read by Tonya Jordan.

Key Questions

Readers might discuss what the effects might be of McMillan's incorporation into her narrative of frequent expletives, slang expressions, and references to product brand names and stars of popular culture. Does this technique, which gives the novel such an upbeat, contemporary flavor, tend in the long run to weaken the enduring messages McMillan introduces?

It should prove fruitful to consider also the crossover qualities in the novel— those elements that give it an interracial appeal. Readers might like to discuss the novel in relation to Waiting to Exhale, and consider whether the character Stella is a mere update of the four women in the earlier work.

1. How would you categorize the novel? Is it a romance? A memoir? Social commentary?

2. One segment of critical opinion holds that the novel lacks the element of real conflict that ordinarily carries a story.

Is Stella's soul-searching adequate to hold interest? If so, why?

3: Is Stella truly likable? Does her pursuit of happiness really seem selfish more than admirable?

4. What does Winston do for Stella's outlook on life? What does McMillan really mean by "groove"?

5. Does the stream-of-consciousness or run-on style of narration, which omits usual punctuation marks, add to or detract from the presentation?

6. Stella calls Quincy her "best buddy" and talks frankly to him on any subject, including the intimacy she will enjoy when Winston comes to live in the home.

What do you think of this mother-son relationship?

7. What does the character of Judas Germaine Rozelle contribute to the novel? Or any other men in it besides Winston?

8. Pros and cons are offered by a number of characters concerning the StellaWinston relationship. Stella's sister Angela is the most vigorous in detailing the "cons." Why, then, does she so readily accept Winston at the end? Is this an inconsistency?

9. Is Winston a good candidate for marriage?

Literary Precedents

How Stella Got Her Groove Back belongs in a broad sense to a long literary tradition of depicting African-American gender relations. Zora Neale Hurston (Their Eyes Were Watching God, 1937), and later Toni Morrison (The Bluest Eye, 1970; see separate entry) and Alice Walker (The Color Purple, 1982; see separate entry) dealt with the theme. While critics have compared McMillan's confident, tough heroines to those of Morrison and Walker, there is general agreement that McMillan takes a much kinder approach to men.

McMillan's work is also acknowledged to represent a break with past and present African-American protest literature.

McMillan's protagonists are upbeat and strikingly successful in careers and urban life. Stella Payne is an outstanding example, and a strong departure from traditional depictions of women victimized by men.

McMillan has been credited with starting a literary movement comprised of writers who do not concern themselves especially with issues of race. She is also credited with demonstrating to the publishing industry that a mass market exists for popular fiction addressed to AfricanAmericans, which can be bought and enjoyed also by whites. Connie Briscoe is sometimes cited as one of the writers to benefit from McMillan's astounding commercial success with that crossover audience. Briscoe's Big Girls Don't Cry (1996), for example, focuses in an upbeat way on a contemporary African-American woman. In the particular matter of writing style, McMillan credits her reading of Ring Lardner's work and to some extent that of Langston Hughes. She especially points to Lardner as the one who helped her realize her freedom to write in her own voice.

Related Titles

McMillan typically writes about relationships. Her second novel Disappearing Acts (1989) depicts a mercurial romance between a Brooklyn schoolteacher, also an aspiring singer, and a sometimesemployed building contractor. McMillan's third novel, the enormously popular Waiting to Exhale (1992; see separate entry), depicts four women—Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, Gloria—who more closely resemble Stella in striking professional success. The only mother among them, Gloria, has a son. Much like Stella, Gloria dotes on her son and wants him to be a strong, confident African-American man who is not afraid to show his feelings. Gloria, like Stella, lives in a predominantly white neighborhood so that her son can be well educated and experience life without gangs.

In Waiting to Exhale, the overriding theme again is self-realization. The four women, though well able to care for themselves financially, seek self-validation in relationships with men. Like Stella, all have had bad past relationships and two women, Savannah and Robin, continue to be unlucky. Stella's encounter with Judas Germaine Rozelle is a brief reminder of problems McMillan depicts in the earlier novel. What sets apart How Stella Got Her Groove Back is the concentration on a harmonious relationship.

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