

An Imperfect Spy Short Guide

An Imperfect Spy by Carolyn Gold Heilbrun

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

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

An Imperfect Spy Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	8
Literary Precedents.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

Kate and Reed are both facing a kind of midlife crisis. Kate is questioning the viability of their relationship and seems to be seeking something more. One wonders if she will have an affair or leave Reed during the course of *An Imperfect Spy*, but neither happens.

Reed on the other hand, seems to have grown complacent at his job. He no longer (at least from Kate's perspective) takes any chances. It is important to both characters that they take time off from their respective positions and teach at a semester at the Schuyler Law School. At the end of the novel both seem revitalized. They reaffirm their love and their commitment to one another. Each has had the opportunity of having an affair but neither seems really inclined to commit to another person. There is something reassuring about this to the reader. Kate and Reed's relationship seems like a constant in an ever-changing world.

Each of the female characters represents a stage in life or a path taken.

Harriet represents the older female or crone character. She is almost invisible to society and has earned the right to refashion her life. She has taken on a totally new persona — borrowed from another woman. She has simplified her life — no husband and (until the final pages) no children to worry about. She is capable, witty, and well-educated and in some respects, she is an older Kate. She has rejected all the trappings of society: She has no home; she has left the rat race of academe by rejecting her professional status as an academic; and she has shed almost all relationships with men except those males she dominates in her "arena" — the copy room and typing pool. She does not allow men to patronize her staff nor to harass them in any way. She is in control of almost all of her life. She lives in a cash society — she pays as she goes. She does manage to manipulate Kate and eventually Reed into helping her daughter, but she never pleads or begs and she never sells herself short.

She has made her decisions and has control of her life.

Barbara (aka Bobbie) represents the young woman. She is just starting out to find herself. She is nearly through with her schooling but still has much to learn about life. She has a crush on Reed which he does not acknowledge.

She is willing to make compromises in order to accomplish her goal of becoming an associate in a Wall Street law firm. Kate asks her "how can she expect any man to take her self seriously when she is being false to herself?"

Betty Osborne was a student in one of Kate's classes on Thomas Hardy and wanted to pursue an academic degree, but she made the mistake of choosing the wrong man to marry. She was a secretary at the Schuyler Law school when she met her husband during a dry spell. After they married, he started drinking again and became abusive.



She takes back her life one night by killing him. She sees herself as a Hardy-esque heroine.

Nellie Rosenbusch was a young tenured law faculty member who struggled to advance the cause of women's rights. As part of some unwritten quota, she was hired to "balance the faculty." She suffered from a hidden condition which caused her to blackout when she was under stress.

The conditions at Schuyler Law School were so stressful for females that she blacked out one day and fell under the wheels of a car. She was literally and figuratively crushed. Initially Kate thinks she may have been pushed by someone at the school but finally decides that Nellie was a victim of more subtle form of abuse and that her death is the result of the stress placed upon her as a female faculty member. Kate sees her as a victim of a backlash against feminism.



Social Concerns

An Imperfect Spy deals with issues centering on the abuse and neglect of women. More specifically, it deals with spousal battery and abuse, the rights of women in the workplace, and with the invisibility of aging women.

When Kate and Reed agree to teach a semester at the second-rate Schuyler Law School, they meet Harriet, a secretary who tells them she is patterning her life after George Smiley, a character created by mystery writer John le Carre. Kate becomes involved in solving two mysteries: the death of Nellie Rosenbusch, the only tenured female faculty member at Schuyler, and the case of Betty Osborne who was convicted and sent to Staten Island for murdering her husband in his sleep before anyone knew anything about battered-women's syndrome.

Another issue is society's perceptions of women. Harriet is an aging women who is able to pass almost without notice into buildings because no one notices old women or if they do, they simply assume the woman is someone's aunt or grandmother.

The final issue is one of conformity.

Barbara, a third-year law student, also known as Bobbie, knows that in order to "make it in a male world of Wall Street" she will have to conform to their dress code and their way of behaving. Kate wonders if Bobbie can actually walk that fine line and still remain true to her ideals and to herself.

Another issue that the book deals with is the backlash against feminism.

Kate and her colleague are locked into a classroom with their students and are later terrorized by a male student. The student physically strikes out against the male teacher but uses much subtler tactics with Kate. He has taken a photo from Hustler magazine and put Kate's head on the figure. Kate feels violated because she knows that all her colleagues have seen the picture.



Techniques

The plot in *An Imperfect Spy* is one of the most satisfying of the Amanda Cross novels. The book is not really hampered by trendy historical happenings that seem to date the other novels but instead focuses on real, substantive issues. It is tightly constructed and turns on its self. Cross has carefully constructed a novel with delightful twists and turns.

We first meet Harriet, who simply appears almost out of nowhere, while Kate is lecturing at the Theban School.

Eventually Harriet appears at Kate's apartment. When queried about her sudden appearance, she reveals that no one takes any notice of old women and it would have been easy to slip past the doorman but instead she simply told him she was Reed's aunt. In other words, she assumed a new identity.

She later reveals that this is not the first time she has assumed a new identity. She simply became Harriet one day when she assumed that identity and shed her worldly possessions. The reader is constantly surprised by Harriet's revelations, and when it is finally revealed that her daughter is Betty, we are not terribly surprised because we have come to expect the unexpected.

Cross uses the character of Harriet as a device to make the reader look beneath the surface of characters and circumstances. Harriet demonstrates that nothing is what it appears to be on the surface. Certainly Fred, the spouse of Betty, was not the man the world was lead to believe. In fact his colleagues conspired to keep his worldly persona in tact at the expense of his wife and children.

Harriet is also responsible for setting the action of the novel in gear.

Before the story begins, she worked in the background to bring Reed and Kate to Schuyler Law School for a semester.

It was important for Harriet to bring Kate to the school because her daughter Betty had liked her and respected her when she took a course from her.

Harriet knows that if anyone could break through Betty's shell, it was Kate. Reed, on the other hand, because of his association with Kate, is the only one who could help draft the write of habeas corpus and begin the process of opening the case in the courts.

Themes

The major theme in *An Imperfect Spy* is self-determination. The book deals with women negotiating or attempting to negotiate in a male dominated world and the male response to female behavior. All of the female characters struggle to direct their own lives. Harriet, the oldest, has taken control of her life by assuming a new identity and rejecting her old lifestyle. Betty, the battered wife, wagered but lost control of her life by killing her husband. Nellie, the tenured faculty member, dies as a result of an accident due to the pressure and harassment in academe. Barbara, the third-year law student, is trying to decide how many concessions she can make to the system and still retain her sense of self. Kate is an independent entity; her economic independence has made her immune to most control by the system, she is involved in a long-term relationship with Reed which is supportive, but she is beginning to question the relationship.



Key Questions

Amanda Cross, writing as Carolyn Heilbrun in *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979), has noted that "an outsider is identified by exclusion from the cultural patterns of bonding at the heart of society, at its centers of power. Outsiders, however, may gain strength in their reaction to exclusion if they bond among themselves, offering each other comradeship, encouragement, protection, support." Heilbrun/Cross often sees women as outsiders. In *An Imperfect Spy* there are many examples of both outsiders and insiders. There are women whose position in society puts them under certain kinds of pressure.

These female roles and pressures should be examined.

1. What is a hero(ine) and are there any in *An Imperfect Spy*?
2. When Persephone is captured by Pluto and taken to Hades, her mother, Demeter, causes the world to go in to a state of suspended animation. No crops grow and the world freezes. Eventually Pluto and Demeter work out a compromise and now half the time Persephone is with her mother and half the time with her husband. During the time she is with Demeter the world blossoms but while she is in Hades, it freezes.

Thus the seasons of the year came about. Why is this legend particularly important to the story?
3. Why is it important that Kate is an independent woman? She has her own money (from a trust fund) which she has never worked for — it came from her father but she uses it to be independent. In *An Imperfect Spy* would you characterize Kate as a radical feminist? Why or why not?
4. Why are there so many references to George Smiley? What type of character is he and how does he relate to this work?
5. What is the role of Reed? What does he add to the story as a character?
6. The novel details different types of relationships between males and females, females and females but not between males and males. Do you feel that this is an accurate statement? Why or why not?
7. *An Imperfect Spy* contains some of the most complete portraits of males created by Amanda Cross. Are they really "complete" or are they stock male characters of the 1990s?
8. There have been many changes in the world since the first Kate Fansler novel; why has the character remained popular?
9. What do you make of Kate's midlife crisis? Does it seem real?



10. How has Kate changed over the years? Are the issues she confronts different or the same? If Cross were just starting out, would her main character be different? In what ways?

Literary Precedents

The "Detective Novel of Manners" is the title of an essay written by Carolyn Heilbrun (Cross's pen-name) and contained in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women* (1990). It contains her musings on the English class system, English imperialism, and detective fiction.

Themes and techniques used in *An Imperfect Spy* may be loosely traced to the work of John le Carre, particularly *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974). In this novel George Smiley works as a mole or double agent just like Harriet in *An Imperfect Spy*. The novel also has elements of Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935), with its community of women scholars, the relationship of Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey as equals, and the theme of the female hero coming into her own. For a more contemporary look at female detectives, P. D. James's mystery, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972) will provide insight into British female detective Cordelia Gray.

In addition to relying on the George Smiley character created by John le Carre, Amanda Cross uses two other major texts in this work: the tale of Demeter and Persephone; and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. These two literary texts permit her to speculate on the nature of "pure women," "victims," power and regeneration, and marriage.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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