Jujitsu for Christ Short Guide

Jujitsu for Christ by Jack Butler

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Contents

Characters

Like others of the best "Southern" novels, Jujitsu for Christ is filled with odd, interesting, idiosyncratic characters, both black and white, who strike the reader as unique individuals but who are instantly recognizable and familiar to anyone who has lived in and closely observed Southern society.

What this means is that Butler, as novelist, has performed the rare feat of creating and portraying human character in such a way that the individual and the typical are blended so perfectly that the characters seem real. It is exactly what Chaucer achieved on a larger scale with his Canterbury pilgrims, and what other authors have done in their most successful work.

Butler's characters include, in addition to Roger, Patsy, and the Gandy family, an array of the most striking minor characters to be found in contemporary fiction. One is Jimmy McMorris, a student-politician and highly visible Christian in high school. His father is pastor at First Baptist; he is himself president of the school Bible Club and a leader in the Youth for Christ organization, as well as an athlete. He is smooth and manipulative; in later life he will succeed in politics. He also, unobtrusively, winds up with Roger's girlfriend, Patsy. Other impressively drawn white characters include June McMullen, who has "come back home" after taking a degree in art at Vanderbilt and becomes Roger's next girlfriend (although she is several years older than he), and Roger Tutwiler, a young banker who befriends Roger Wing, hires him as a bank guard, eventually fires him in an ironic twist after Roger thwarts a bank robbery, and finally winds up with Roger's second girlfriend, June. The list is rounded out by William Percy Alexander Sledge, known as Little Wide Load, who is a second-string fullback for the University of Mississippi football team. In one of the novel's last scenes, Little Wide Load charges drunkenly into the midst of a Ku Klux Klan rally, wreaking havoc. Minor black characters are portrayed with equal skill. They include Mosey Froghead, proprietor of a locally famous and disreputable barbecue restaurant and beer joint; Leon Cool, a radical activist, drug dealer, and petty criminal; and the wino and murder victim Elrod.

Butler's physical descriptions of these characters and their actions are mas terly, but it is in his rendering of their individual voices — what they say and how they say it — that the author most effectively creates the illusion of their human reality.

Social Concerns

Set in racially troubled Mississippi in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, Jujitsu for Christ naturally reflects the social turmoil of its time and place. Indeed, the novel's social concerns are most obviously centered in the relations between the races, white and black, both on the larger scale of society as a whole and on the individual scale of the characters in the book.

It is clear through the personalities of the characters and their actions and interactions with one another that this novel affirms and upholds such values as love, tolerance, and community.

This is not to say that the novel is didactic, or that it "preaches" its "message" to the reader. On the contrary, the novel's social values are inculcated subtly by the author's dramatizing and exemplifying them (and their opposites) in the thoughts, statements, and behavior of the characters.

The array of characters who interact on levels from the most intimate to the most distant includes, like the population of Mississippi itself, a roughly equal mixture of whites and blacks.

Against a social background that includes a Ku Klux Klan rally, an Ole Miss football game, and a terrifying recipe for barbecue sauce, the apparent protagonist of the novel, Roger Wing, a young white man drawn somewhat in the naively innocent tradition of Huckleberry Finn, must come to terms with his society's racist past, its turbulent present, and its uncertain prospects for the future. The lives that he touches, and that touch him, constitute a process of maturation or "coming of age" that has always been a classic literary pattern.

As is almost inevitable in any novel that can be called "Southern," the historical background is prominent in Jujitsu for Christ. It is, of course, the "history" of the South that is responsible for the turmoil of the novel's present, and the legacy of that past, its hovering specter, must somehow be accommodated or exorcised if there is to be hope for a better future.

The solution, or part of it, offered by Jujitsu for Christ is put forth by the narrator (whose voice, as will be explained later, is not to be identified with that of the author) in a passage where he intrudes into the story to answer a question posed by one of the characters. Roger's mother, Sissy, has said in a family discussion that she worries about the fates of the children who, in her view, will be the products of the rampant miscegenation that will inevitably follow integration: "'Half white, half colored,' his mother said.

'Where will they live?'" A few pages later, the narrator, whose identity the reader will not know until the final pages of the book, speaks in his own voice, saying he wants to answer Sissy's question "about where the children will live." He's "figured it out": they

will all go to the future. "The future, Sissy. We all pick up and move to the future, gel, because there ain't no room in the past. Too many whirlpools. Turns out this is a science-fiction story, a time-travel story. Tune in yo future-vision, gel, set it say 25 years ahead. Look at yo tv then. You a see where all a pretty little coffee and chocolate children went." This "solution" amounts not so much to an accommodation with the past or a repudiation of it as a transcendence of the past, a moving beyond it, perhaps out of the range of its pernicious influence.

Techniques

Butler has characterized himself as a "deeply experimental" writer, one who feels the need to "push the limits of form in every book" and who is "fascinated by the question of the narrator."

Indeed, the matter of narrative voice proves to be the most interesting technical aspect of all three novels Butler has published to this date, although his interest in "voice" is pervasive. It is fair to say, in fact, as Butler himself has said many times in discussing his fiction, that his chief interest lies in creating the unique and individual voices of each of his characters. What he most likes to do is, as he puts it, "play the slide guitar of voices." This interest is both evident and realized in masterly fashion in all three novels; what is perhaps most remarkable is that it is done with such skill even in this first novel.

A brief sketch of the way Butler handles narrative voice in Jujitsu for Christ will illustrate both the author's interest in the matter and his technical execution. In this book the narration flows smoothly enough for some thirteen chapters, with scarcely a hint that we are listening to anything other than a standard, third-person, more-or-less omniscient narrator, unidentifiable as any particular personage and speaking almost entirely in the bland, generic English such narrators commonly employ. But then, near the end of the chapter titled "Ring in the New," the narrator intrudes for the first time in the first person, commenting on his story. Observing that this "would be a good way to end a chapter, a move I have made before," the narrator refers to the question Roger's mother, Sissy, raised earlier in the chapter, about where the children of mixed race would live. The narrator ends his intrusion, and the chapter, by identifying himself, apparently, with those children: "Went to the future. And that ain't all. We still movin. Niggers on Mars, gel, niggers on Mars." This is strange, and the reader is taken aback, puzzled, perhaps made a bit uncomfortable. Not only has the narrator — or the author — apparently violated the third-person convention, but he has affected some sort of parody of black dialect. The author is white; we've seen his picture on the dust jacket. Is this some strange kind of irony? Or is it merely an offensively patronizing misstep by the author? That question will remain unanswered for a while, for in the next chapter narration reverts to the conventional.

A bit later the narrator slips briefly into the first person again, describing a tentative sexual encounter between Roger and the thirteen-year-old Eleanor Roosevelt Gandy. "I didn't have any idea how hard it would be to write this part down," the narrator says. "I don't know how much of it I can tell.

There's no reason for me to lie about it, because Roger never did. There's no reason to cover anything up about it, because Roger never tried to hide it or cover it up." After describing the incident, the narrator offers one more comment: "Every time I think about it, I think I may have to kill him after all."

Clues to the narrator's identity exist in this passage, but they are ambiguous.

It sounds as if Roger has possibly told part or all of the story to the narrator, but it may just be the author playing what he fancies is a clever game with the reader, simperingly threatening to "kill off" one of his characters for bad behavior. This is, after all, a first novel.

A third intrusion comes some forty pages later, when the narrator interrupts the story to insert a poem, presumably of his own making, concerning the civil rights turmoil in 1961. The poem begins, Didn't have no genetic code in 1961.

Nigger had to hit the road, white man had a gun.

Send in yo hate to this address, we'll run it through the machine, we'll digitize yo lies I guess until they come out clean. . . .

Following the poem, the narrator shifts to the second person, pretending to berate himself for interrupting: "Nigger, what are you doing? You got to quit this digressing. You got to finish this book. Blowing yo story-line like that. Must be crazy." By this time the reader is probably confused and perhaps ready to be offended. The mystery is solved, however, and any potential offense erased, by the final chapter, titled "Bluejay Speaks." "Bluejay," the reader recalls, is the identity young Marcus Gandy earlier assumed as sidekick to Roger's "Captain Mississippi" character in the fantasy game the two had played. The narrator has been, all along, Marcus, writing from a perspective years later, after Roger has migrated to California and Marcus has become a writer, having attended the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas. Everything makes sense at last. Attentive readers may even flip back to the book's epigraph, a narrated dialogue between a firstperson speaker and a character called "Nephew," and make sense of that.

Importantly, the reader does not finally feel that he has been manipulated and tricked by a superficially clever author.

Instead, Butler's fictional reality is so compelling, and Butler himself so convincingly absent from it, that the reader willingly accepts the fiction as that of Marcus, a character the reader has known and loved throughout the book, much as readers accept the delightful "Geffrey" as the "author" of the Canterbury Tales, catching scarcely a glimpse of "Chaucer the poet." At the same time, the critical reader must feel, on a different level, that deep satisfaction that comes from witnessing an artistic coup effected with masterly skill.

Themes

As suggested above, Jujitsu for Christ is in part a "coming of age" story that follows the intellectual and emotional growth of the central character from the callow naivete of youth to whatever levels of maturity, equilibrium, or wisdom he will attain in the scope of the narrative. This works out most obviously in the character of Roger Wing, who studies martial arts (jujitsu) in high school and about the time of his graduation is converted to Southern Baptist Christianity mainly as a result of his infatuation with Patsy Wingo.

Roger's plan to open a martial arts studio in which he will simultaneously teach his customers to defend themselves and convert them to Christianity is both an important part of the novel's plot and, perhaps, a metaphor for the generally inept and incongruous attempts by society at large to blend religion and worldly concerns into mixtures doomed to failure by their own components.

Roger does grow, in mind and in spirit, through experiences that move from the comic to the tragic, and in the end he will leave Mississippi, taking with him the young black boy, Marcus Gandy. Marcus is the younger son of a black family that befriended Roger and that has disintegrated by the novel's tragic conclusion. He has been a friend and protege of the older Roger throughout the book.

On another level, Jujitsu for Christ may also be seen as an account of the growth and maturation of the narrator, who the reader discovers at the end has all along been not the novelist Butler or even his conventional, disembodied persona, but instead Marcus Gandy, now grown up and a writer.

Roger's having left Mississippi with Marcus (they went to northwest Arkansas where Roger passed the light-skinned, green-eyed Marcus off as his nephew) may be seen as a dramatic enactment of the narrator's earlier remark about "picking up and moving to the future." From his later perspective as narrator and novelist, that is exactly what he has done.

Another thematic concern has to do with what it is currently fashionable to refer to as "family values." Two sets of such values are implicitly played against each other: those of Roger's family and those of the Gandy family.

Roger's family isn't much of a family.

His father was a ne'er-do-well redneck who died in his pick-up truck when Roger was eight years old. He was neither a satisfactory parent to Roger nor a suitable husband to Roger's mother Sissy, a shallow, vapid woman whose social ambitions preferred "carpeting and central air and tv and bermuda grass instead of a screen porch and a window fan and a hound dog and a rusty Chevy on blocks." Accordingly, Sissy, oblivious to her son's growing loneliness and isolation, married a Yankee — a plant floor manager who had been transferred by his company from Indiana. This stepfather is insensitive

and boorish and never achieves any sort of familial bond with Roger. After he graduates from high school in Clinton, Roger leaves home for Jackson, the nearby capital city, rents a vacant "washateria" building, and embarks on his first business venture: the martial arts studio where he will offer "jujitsu for Christ."

As Roger remodels his studio, he is visited by one of the neighborhood children, the bright and energetic Marcus. Marcus Aurelius Gandy is the youngest member of a black family headed by A. L. (Abraham Lincoln) Gandy that includes Marcus's mother, Snower Mae, his older brother T. J. (Thomas Jefferson), who is a junior in high school — an excellent student and quarterback of the football team — and Marcus's sister, Eleanor Roosevelt, older than he but younger than T. J. Mr. Gandy has recently moved his family from Alligator, Mississippi (a background that parallels Butler's), to Jackson, hoping to enhance his children's opportunities. Mr. Gandy, although he has been a poor laborer all his life, is a man of encyclopedic learning — self-taught, of course — who maintains a large private library and places great value on education. He is a figure of enormous dignity, sensitivity, and insight The irrepressible Marcus quickly wins Roger's friendship and invites him to supper with his family. After a shaky start — Snower Mae, startled when she realizes that their dinner guest is white, accidentally dumps a bowl of steaming mashed potatoes on Roger's head, and when T. J. arrives, he angrily demands to know "What is this honkie doing in my house?" — the relationship blossoms and Roger is virtually adopted into the Gandy family.

Marcus becomes his constant companion, and the two of them devise a Batman-and-Robin type of game, complete with appropriate costumes (Roger, after all, is himself still a teenager), in which Roger becomes Captain Mississippi and Marcus is his boy sidekick Bluejay. The game turns serious when in one of their night-time excursions Roger witnesses a brutal murder and feels that he must shield Marcus from the experience.

The Gandy family provides a partial substitute for the relationships in which Roger's life has been deficient, but the grim social realities of the time and place will ultimately destroy this admirable family and force Roger into such alienation that he must abandon his culture and flee to Arkansas.

Adaptations

The film rights to the novel have been optioned and Butler has written a film script, but to date no plans to proceed with the production have been announced.

Key Questions

Butler's fiction offers three attractive and fruitful areas for discussion: plot; form and technique; and characters. In Jujitsu for Christ especially, the plot should provoke spirited discussion of questions involving the civil rights movement and its continuing legacy, as well as broader questions having to do with race relations, the role of religion in society, and other problematical areas. As far as form and technique are concerned, investigation of the relationship of the author to his work and his apparent relative presence in it or absence from it can be conducted on a fairly sophisticated level of inquiry.

The identity of the narrator as it is gradually revealed can be an intriguing puzzle for many readers. (It is said that in a book club discussion of Jujitsu for Christ the reviewer began her remarks by saying that she was certain of two things about the author: that he was black, and that he was very angry.)

Perhaps most interesting (and most appropriate, given Butler's overriding interest in the matter of fictional voice) would be discussion of the ways various characters reveal themselves through their speech. The ways Butler's characters speak in their unique voices — how they say what they say — are at least as important as the content of their speech. These nuances of expression could be explored almost endlessly.

This novel also possesses an interesting sociological dimension, in that it portrays a particular subset of American society at a critical juncture in its modern history: Mississippi in the throes of the civil rights movement.

This will seem a culture more or less alien to many readers outside the South, especially younger readers who have no direct knowledge of events several decades in the past. Probing that culture as it is reflected in this book could be, for some, both enlightening and interesting.

1. How do the attitudes expressed toward each other by the black and white characters in this book square with your own perceptions about racial attitudes? Are race relations in the book more or less hostile than you would have expected?

2. Attempt to identify the most admirable and the least admirable characters in the book. Are their qualities, good or bad, directly related to their racial identity? If so, or if not, what might this mean?

3. Compare the "coming of age" process Roger Wing goes through with that of Mark Twain's Huck Finn. What similarities and differences do you find in the events that shape the two characters' understanding, as well as in the ultimate nature of that understanding?

4. Choose a character and analyze his or her particular speech patterns.

Do you have difficulty understanding what the character means to say? Do the idiosyncrasies of the character's voice contribute to your knowledge and understanding of that character? If so, how and to what extent?

5. Do you find A. L. Gandy a credible character? Why or why not?

6. Analyze the scene in which Little Wide Load charges into the Klan rally.

What do you suppose his personal motives are? Does the scene perhaps have wider symbolic meaning? Explore.

7. Do you think the "message" of this book is essentially optimistic or pessimistic (or somewhere in between), as far as the prospects for American society are concerned?

8. The kind of religion that figures so prominently in this book is fundamentalist Christianity of the Southern Baptist variety. How does this correspond with other varieties of religious belief and practice with which you may be familiar?

9. Considerable political posturing and demagoguery hover in the background of this novel. How do these correspond with present-day politics and issues?

10. What was your reaction to the several intrusions by the narrator in his own voice? What did you make of these when they occurred? Who did you think was speaking?

11. When did you begin to suspect that the story was being told by some person other than "the author?"

12. How did you feel about the final revelation of the narrator's identity?

(One or two reviewers thought this was a cheap trick on the author's part that detracted from the novel's overall effect, but the great majority of reviewers praised it.)

Literary Precedents

Jujitsu for Christ, with its characters, setting, and concerns, must certainly be classified as a "Southern novel," and its author therefore as a "Southern writer." The designation, however, no longer necessarily means the same thing it used to mean when applied to Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and the others whose works Butler has referred to as "our grand canon." The South, and Southern writing, have moved out of themselves and more into the broader world. And that world has penetrated into the South: both have become more like each other. As Marcus, as narrator, observes in Jujitsu for Christ, "America is Mississippi now.

You don't think it is? You wrong."

Nevertheless, Butler's fiction has deeply ingrained in it those elements that in the past have been thought to characterize Southern writing: the distinctive voices, the peculiar ways the people speak; the ponderous weight of family concerns; the brooding prominence of place; the pervasive influence of the Christian religion and its Holy Scriptures; and the inextricably entangled coexistence of the black and white races. Yet Southern writing generally, and Butler's in particular, are not immune to literary trends and developments. Black comedic fabulation and metafictional tricks of narrative perspective and technique find their places in contemporary Southern fiction, including Butler's.

In a broader perspective, it is impossible not to cite Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) among the literary progenitors of Jujitsu for Christ. And while this same ancestry can be claimed for any number of twentieth-century American novels (so powerful is the influence of Twain's classic), it seems especially true in the present case. The relationship between Roger and Marcus distantly parallels that between Huck and Jim in Twain's work, although the characters' ages are reversed, and the processes of emotional and intellectual growth and understanding that Roger goes through are in some ways strikingly similar to Huck's. They come to some of the same understandings. And in the end, when Roger takes Marcus and heads west, for the hills of northwest Arkansas, it is easy enough to see these events as a spiritual re-enactment of Huck's decision: "I reckon I got to light out for the territory."

Related Titles

Relationships of form, technique, and content exist among all three of Butler's novels. Please see the separate entries on Nightshade (1989) and Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock (1993).

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