Kinflicks Short Guide

Kinflicks by Lisa Alther

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.

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.

Contents

Characters

Ginny seems to lack character and often frustrates the reader by her indecisive behavior, as she is constantly influenced by peers or lovers. Seldom if ever does she take an independent stand or make her own choices. By the book's end, she is over thirty years old, prevented from seeing her child, and her future is by no means clear. The reader still feels she could be swept up into a new enthusiasm with the next person she meets. Ginny is a "childwoman," she has little to say or offer in her own right. Her experiences and acquaintances are far more colorful than she.

Since the novel is episodic, only one other character is present throughout, Ginny's mother, Mrs. Babcock. She possesses some force, strength and consistency that Ginny lacks, which may be why one critic (Diane Hass in Library Journal) said the mother emerges as the true heroine. The mother is seen (largely through Ginny's eyes) as rigid, distant, cold, and unappealing, until the last long section of the book which deals with the mother's death, when she becomes somewhat expressive, and most dignified.

Social Concerns/Themes

Kinflicks is a grab bag of nearly every social-political issue of the 1960s and the 1970s as the heroine goes through numerous "passages" in search of her identity, which she still has not found at the end. Ginny, at first a conventional cheerleader type, becomes attracted to fads and mentors, participating in most of the radical-liberal causes of the times: protest, drugs, feminism, sexual experimentation (including lesbianism), and communal living. Exposed to other influences, she can be transformed back into a dainty, prim housewife, only temporarily. The book satirizes a variety of life styles (and their zealots) equally, as the author brings out the absurd exaggerations of every movement.

Ginny's shrill fanaticism, and the ease with which she is led in and out of causes, were typical in the 1960s among many of those associated with counterculture movements. The jarring changes Ginny goes through have some reality, and the book is one of many which will show future generations how volatile — and confusing — life could be at this time, especially for the malleable.

Techniques

Kinflicks alternates between satire and seriousness, with mixed success according to most critics, who nevertheless were impressed by such nerve — and energy — in a first novel. A mixture of tones is achieved by having alternate chapters told in Ginny's own irreverent, slangy (profane) style, and the author's removed, more objective voice; many events are thus seen from two perspectives. Ginny, not without intelligence, often seems to understand, or to comment sardonically on what happens to her, even while remaining passive.

The intention is to make the reader want to laugh, then cry, and to view Ginny's odyssey from both inside and outside. This double vision prolongs the novel's length and its effectiveness is questionable.

The mixture of comedy and seriousness, even tragedy, is occasionally jarring, especially in the sudden occurrence of a gruesome, gratuitous decapitation. It does sometimes seem that Ginny bounces back from such calamity with unnatural ease.

Literary Precedents

Several critics, including the New Yorker's, have compared the book to The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1951), a much shorter coming-of-age novel which mixes satire with seriousness and blasphemy. But Holden Caulfield, in The Catcher in the Rye, was a much more substantial and visible character in his own right than the amorphous Ginny. Holden rebelled against conformity while Ginny conforms to her surroundings of the moment.

A more likely comparison is to Erica Jong's best-selling comic sexual odyssey, Fear of Flying (1973), whose popularity (as Time magazine pointed out) probably made it possible for this first novel to get such a send-off. Once again, though, Alther's book seems somewhat unique in the weakness of her character, who probably has not overcome most of her fears.

Taking the historical view, one could trace the tradition of episodic, bawdy, picturesque novels back to Tom Jones (Fielding, 1749), and Lisa Alther might like to be allied with the eighteenthcentury age of satire.

Related Titles

In Other Women (1984) Caroline Kelley, a confused, often tormented lesbian nurse, is a "bleeding heart" liberal who suffers for every injustice she sees, every instance of someone causing pain. She even turns against her pet cat when she sees it chase a bird. Ambivalent, she constantly wants to embrace life and the world, but forever draws back, angered at some new outrage. She is also confused about her sexual identity and is still vacillating between men and women.

Through her therapy, she finally begins to relax, to enjoy herself, to laugh, and to accept her sexuality.

The therapist, Hannah Burke, is a compelling, haunting, powerful character. A woman who has been through scathing horrors, including the terrible deaths of her children, she retains her equilibrium and seems a rock of compassion, energy, and strength to Caro line. Her wisdom is so phenomenal, and her character is so fascinating, that one wonders whether Alther's portrayal of a therapist is more ideal than real.

Caroline is almost obsessively concerned with most of the social ills and injustices of the world. She talks about them constantly, observes them wherever she goes, and lets them interfere with her day. As a nurse, she is regularly forced to see the effects of violence and cruelty, and what she sees prevents her from enjoying herself.

Unlike some of her fellow nurses, she is unable to forget the sordid injustices and beatings she treats; she goes out for drinks with her friends and broods while they relax and enjoy themselves.

Finally she considers suicide and, fortunately, seeks therapy instead. Other Women is a novel of self-discovery, healing, and tentative optimism. Making a carefully guided journey from near-suicide to acceptance of herself (if not all the injustices of the world), Caroline becomes a more positive character than Alther's earlier women characters, who remained somewhat lost.

Of course, the women in Kinflicks and in Original Sins (1981) did not have a therapist of such meticulously detailed guidance to help them. And, in this sense, the "healing" and optimism in Other Women are double, because the reader is shown how the therapist had overcome her own demons, with her own therapeutic female helper. Other Women gives a feeling of cyclical aid and support, passed through generations of women. Other Women deals with the problem of how a sensitive, aware person is to cope with the meanness of everyday life.

The theme of lesbianism, in the background of Alther's two previous books, assumes prominence here. Caroline and her children begin to understand sexual choices and identities. The novel contains a number of extremely explicit and detailed love scenes between the women.

Other Women contains, perhaps, the most intensive and in-depth treatment of therapy in a novel. About a third of the book consists of Caroline's sessions with her therapist, Hannah.

The most innovative technique of Other Women — which was totally absent from Alther's previous novels — is the almost documentary style of the sessions. The story often halts in the tracing of every step of a patient-therapist relationship, with a fair amount of professional jargon. Alther reveals the patient's reluctance, occasional hostility, then her steps forward and setbacks, and how the therapist anticipates and copes with each stage. At such times the novel almost ceases to be plotted fiction. To Alther's credit, the reader looks forward to each new session and step as he would to a plot development in another book. With a less interesting relationship, a less convincing therapist, Other Women would slow to a deadly pace.

Other Women deals in subject matter which has seldom, if ever, found its way to best seller lists or wide readership. Although there have been many lesbian novels since the 1920s, few of these have appealed to more than a specialized public. Novels about therapy have also lacked wide popularity.

Thus, in combining these two subjects, Other Women may have broken new ground in introducing them to more people than before. A more immediate and recent precedent is Marilyn French's 1977 best seller The Women's Room, a feminist novel filled with much anti-male anger and suspicion, emotions which are prominent here, though for different reasons. In French's novel, most of the women were psychically if not physically battered by men, while here, the protagonist and her friends simply prefer women.

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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