The Knockout Artist Short Guide

The Knockout Artist by Harry Crews

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Characters

Eugene Biggs is one of Crews's most fully developed fictional characters.

His redneck background is the source of both his difficulties and his strengths; his life in New Orleans is the development of his character and the exploration of his options. Forced to leave home because of the poverty of his family, he takes with him a core of values: a respect for the truth, a need for personal integrity, and a sense of responsibility for others. When he fails in his dream of becoming a fighter, he must depend for survival on a society more corrupt, complex, and deceptive than he is equipped to handle. When the exigencies of surviving conflict with his values, he determines not to think about what he is doing. Eventually, however, he realizes that in not thinking, he has consented in his own destruction. When he discovers the intended betrayal of Jacques for money, Eugene sees a chance to redeem himself both vicariously (the young fighter reminds him of himself) and directly (by dissociating himself from a destructive world). In so doing, he provides affirmation and hope in the otherwise dark and absurd world of the novel.

The counter character to Eugene in every respect is Mr. Blasingame, whose pale, emaciated appearance physically suggests the death and decay he represents. His extreme wealth, power, and decadence epitomize everything with which Eugene must struggle, and both Eugene's character and his spiritual progress are brought out in his dealings with Blasingame. The opening party, an orgy of drugs and sex hosted by Blasingame, shows Eugene willing to knock himself out for the entertainment of a decadent mob. The measure of his change is his final rejection of Blasingame's world. His refusal to participate in the sell-out of Jacques, and his decision to warn Jacques against Blasingame, is his refusal to live any longer in a world where the only choices are to use or be used.

Charity Beechum, the wealthy beau ty who selects Eugene as the subject of her dissertation, is Blasingame's intellectual counterpart, offering Eugene sex and material goods in return for the right to use him. She, too, has little regard for his well-being, except as it furthers her own aims. She is somewhat more sympathetic than Blasingame in that her study is an attempt to justify herself to an academic establishment that has first encouraged, then rejected her. But as victim turned exploiter, she has simply changed sides in the destructive relationship of user and used. Eugene finally sees through her motives and continues to regenerate himself by moving out of her apartment and forcing her to burn the research she has collected on him. Having conquered his self-destructive practice of knocking himself out, he now rejects the material luxuries and sexual gratification that entrap him.

Pete, the has-been fighter who is Eugene's best friend, and Jacques, the young Cajun fighter they agree to train, represent humanity more positively. Pete's honesty and concern seem the only solid ground in Eugene's life, but his capacity for love eventually traps him, and he sells out both Eugene and Jacques to buy drugs for the woman he

loves. Only Jacques remains uncorrupted, and his decision to leave New Orleans with Eugene holds promise that knocking oneself out may not be the only means of survival.

Social Concerns/Themes

In The Knockout Artist, Crews moves from the poor white Georgia-Florida setting of his earlier novels, to the urban culture of New Orleans. The struggle for survival and fulfillment on every level of existence remains Crews's dominant concern, however, and the affluent sophisticates of New Orleans are as partial, needy, and destructive as their redneck counterparts.

Their greater wealth and sophistication only makes them more powerful and therefore more dangerous — the danger more difficult to detect and control.

Trying to make his way in and through this treacherous world is Eugene Talmadge Biggs, the Knockout Artist. Son of an impoverished family in economically depressed Georgia, Eugene must survive on his own. The hope of escaping a life of dead-end, unskilled jobs flashes briefly when his speed, agility, and determination make him an undercard success at boxing.

But when increasingly tough opponents eventually find his glass jaw, Eugene is deserted by Budd, his manager and surrogate father. In despair at his own failure and Budd's desertion, Eugene slams his fist into his jaw and knocks himself out. Discovering that, in the perverse value structure of modern society, others find this act entertaining and will pay to watch, he goes on knocking himself out, both literally and metaphorically.

More broadly, the novel presents a world dominated by the destructive symbiosis between knockout artists and their audience. When an acquaintance, who prostitutes herself to support her female lover, tells Eugene he is "one of us," she is pointing out his willingness to victimize himself for others' gratification. Eugene does exactly that, most blatantly in knocking himself out publicly, more quietly but insidiously in agreeing to live with the beautiful and wealthy Charity while she "studies" him and his friends for her psychology dissertation. Even Pete, Eugene's best friend and a voice of sanity throughout most of the novel, ultimately sells out to help the woman he loves support her drug habit.

While those who are used knock themselves out for others, the users distort and degrade themselves in other ways. Their minor vices are profligate spending, kinky sex, and drug abuse; their major and most disfiguring sin is the use of other people as objects, controlling them through fulfillment or denial of their material and emotional needs. Many characters are both victims and users, the role varying with the relationship, but all seem caught in the same destructive pattern.

Crews does, however, finally offer as hope in this darkness the old-fashioned virtue of integrity. Eugene's conscious refusal to think about his way of life is the basis for his ultimate rejection of it. His need to suppress his revulsion testifies to its continued existence. When he learns that Charity has assessed his self-inflicted knockouts as small death wishes, Eugene is shocked both by the validity of the perception itself and by the coldly clinical dissection of his soul that has yielded it. Angered and humiliated,

he resolves to stop consenting in his own destruction, accepting full responsibility for himself. When he shortly discovers that Jacques, a trusting young fighter he has been helping to train, is to be sacrificed by his owners in an unequal match, Eugene extends that sense of responsibility by taking Jacques away from New Orleans.

The novel's affirmation is limited: Eugene and Jacques are a tiny minority in their world, and they are without resources beyond themselves. The novel ends as they set out on their journey, but what they renounce seems worse than what they risk.

Techniques

In The Knockout Artist, Crews has abandoned his characteristic shifting point of view and multiple narrative lines to focus steadily on Eugene. As a result, Eugene is more fully developed than Crews's other protagonists, and his world is explored entirely in terms of its impact on him. The steady intensity of the focus confines the reader to Eugene's perspective, limiting alternative views, and giving prime importance to his values, conflicts, and choices.

Narrative structure supports the novel's shift in emphasis from the social to the individual. Inverting his customary pattern in support of his theme, Crews begins with the mass hysteria of a large party and concludes with the quietly private action of Eugene and Jacques leaving New Orleans.

The alternation of many public and private scenes remains the means of narrative development, but the direction is away from, rather than toward, public cataclysm.

As a result of all these choices, the novel's tone is more quietly serious and less comically detached than in the earlier novels. There are also fewer physical freaks, fewer bizarre objects of affection and worship to divert attention from character itself.

Ironically, language is more consistently polite and elevated, not because the world is a finer one but because in it education and polish are carefully cultivated disguises for exploitation and brutality.

Literary Precedents

Eugene's experiences in the world beyond home share elements with classic initiation stories. Young men learning how to make their way in the world go as far back as Homer's Telemachus and have continued to fascinate throughout literary history, with more recently familiar counterparts in the fiction of Charles Dickens and Horatio Alger. A particularly interesting parallel is Nathaniel Hawthorne's Robin Molineux, who comes from good country stock, is pulled to the city by economic necessity and the promise of assistance from a father figure, and must eventually face a corrupt world on his own. As usual, however, Crews reshapes literary patterns to his own vision of contemporary man.

Related Titles

The world of fighters and bodybuilders detailed in The Knockout Artist is also a major element in Karate Is a Thing of the Spirit (1971), The Gypsy's Curse (1974), and All We Need of Hell (1987). The more general concepts of the struggle for survival and the extremes of human behavior are characteristic of all Crews's work. In setting, technique, and tone, however, The Knockout Artist is a departure from the earlier novels.

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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