

Last Notes from Home Short Guide

Last Notes from Home by Frederick Exley

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Characters

For all his self-ascribed dementia, Fred Exley, the narrator of this novel, is moderate and mild-mannered. Next to the extreme behaviors exhibited by characters integral or incidental, Exley's behavior seems benign, often ineffectual. Many early Watertown friends appear and reappear in this tale; their lives and that of the narrator intersect at odd but believable points.

Others—O'Twoomey, The Brigadier, Robin Glenn—play larger roles. The author introduces characters abruptly, often, but is adept, however, at exposing interpersonal relationships as a story unfolds.

At the outset, Ex is en route to Hawaii and his brother's deathbed. He writes: "The Brigadier served in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam, and I thought his tale might tell us something of the mid-twentieth century American Nightmare. Alas, The Brigadier and I shall never—at least together—tell the story of his life." Instead, as critic Mary Cantrell writes, "It is not, in fact, the Brigadier's tale that Ex tells but, once again, his own."

On the flight to Hawaii, Exley meets the bigoted, gluttonous Irishman O'Twoomey, whose prodigious appetites and unswerving opinions render Exley's pale by comparison. Throughout *Last Notes from Home* O'Twoomey—a fearsome, archetypal father—holds Exley captive, figuratively if not literally. Finally, O'Twoomey suggests Ex might obtain his "freedom" through marriage to Robin Glenn.

Robin Glenn happily trades her life as a stewardess, a "celestial hash-slinger," for an uncharted future as the wife of this novel's author and protagonist.

Robin's compulsive, outrageous fabrications amuse and amaze Exley, who prefers stories and storytelling to the banalities of truth-telling any day. Of Robin, he writes, "She ultimately had become nothing other than that brute American male fantasy of the cornbread princess and, in her awful fragility, she had devoted her life to living up to that fantasy, however unsought it had been on her part, only to have had it all turn to ashes in her mouth. God, she was America."

Exley continues in his much-heralded role as fan, not player, living vicariously when, at the close of *Last Notes from Home*, he watches Robin surfing, "riding a wave." Synonymous though riding a wave may seem with achievement or success, Exley diminishes the moment, for Robin, suggesting that she performs chiefly for his praise.



Social Concerns/Themes

Last Notes from Home revisits themes Exley introduces in previous novels: the "myth" of the American Dream, the demise of heroes, personal failure, and our societal fascination with alcoholism and madness. Whether examining, through his characters, how our heroes have toppled or why so many in America seek solace in alcohol, Exley underscores the need he and his readers seem to share for an imagined, Utopian life beyond the drudgery of day-to-day existence. Last Notes from Home is, in part, a eulogy—to youthful ideals forgone, to brotherly love and, finally, to the inimitable, interminable bonds of home.

Set largely on the Hawaiian island of Lanai, the action of this novel is refracted always through the eyes of Ex, a narrator who spent his formative years in Watertown, New York, and who is never far, for long, in body or spirit from that place and its people.

Like James Joyce, who Exley says also "never left home" and whose "lonely, impoverished exile on the Continent" was an academic ruse, Exley's attempts to deny his Irish Catholic heritage fail utterly. Imprisoned in "paradise" (Lanai) by James Searnus Finbarr O'Twoomey (another mad Irish nationalist exile), Exley, ironically, offers back-handed admiration to the pathological passion with which O'Twoomey embraces his homeland.

In this novel, the righteousness fueling O'Twoomey's guerilla war from afar counterpoints the "shame" which Ex says "killed" his brother, The Brigadier. The Brigadier's involvement in Vietnam, according to Ex, steals his spirit, his innermost sense of right and wrong. Throughout this narrative, Exley suggests that what began with the atom bomb and culminated in Vietnam was ultimately the collective recognition of individual powerlessness. However, both Exley's brother, The Brigadier, and his captor, O'Twoomey, maintain their idealism longer than does Exley himself. Exhausting his "15 minutes of fame" in adolescent athletics, Exley then retires to the sidelines as a spectator-cumwriter, abdicating further responsibility for being a player in the game of life.

As a typical American guy for whom heroes and institutions have fallen hard, Exley does retain residual faith in the healing grace of marriage. He seeks salvation, of a sort, in pursuing Robin Glenn, the Miss America of this novel and Exley's second wife in "real" life. Ex also finds both torment and tonic in alcohol and in forays into pure fantasy. A final theme girding Last Notes from Home is the notion that bondage can be at once good and evil.

Techniques

Perhaps because Exley began his tripartite "fictional Memoir" relatively late in life, all three volumes are retrospective and focus on recurrent concerns. His novels differ most notably in that each revolves around specific foils, "historical" or "Fictional" characters set up in contradistinction to the narrator. Frequently — as with the description of O'Twoomey — Exley's use of hyperbole stops just short of caricature.

Thus, he tests readers' "willing suspension of disbelief" at every turn, challenging his audience to empathize with marginally unbelievable characters. His diction is courtly yet strewn with epithets, bawdy and wry. Stanley Reynolds says reading Exley's prose is very much like being seduced by a genius barfly.

Last Notes from Home relies on the dramatic monologue convention of apostrophe, wherein the narrator addresses a silent third party and the reader overhears. Exley directs his confessions and recollections to two parties in this novel: Matt Dillion, the quintessential male American hero and Alyssa Tunstall-Phinn. Alyssa is a complex creation: part lover, part psychoanalyst, academician extraordinaire and female nemesis. If Matt Dillion is Hollywood's American Dream personified, Alyssa Tunstall-Phinn is the Academy's.



Key Questions

Last Notes from Home completes the "fictional memoir" Exley began with A Fan's Notes and, as such, spans most of the author's adult life. One area worth exploring relative to the culminating nature of this novel might be the temporal landscape, or changes wrought over time.

1. In what significant ways does the Fred Exley of Last Notes from Home differ from the Fred Exley of Pages from a Cold Island or A Fan's Notes? What personality traits remain consistent from one novel to the next?
2. How does Last Notes from Home compare or contrast structurally with Exley's two prior memoirs?
3. Discuss the use of apostrophe in Last Notes from Home. How does this technique shape or influence reader response?
4. Explore the irony implicit in Exley's purported "imprisonment in paradise."
5. What role does The Brigadier play herein? Robin Glenn? O'Twoomey?
6. In what ways does this novel challenge a reader's willing suspension of disbelief"?
7. What might one reviewer mean when he says, "with this novel Exley succeeds in making 'home' a place on the literary map"?

Literary Precedents

In his skillful, irreverent mesh of fact and fiction, Exley joins a small cohort of his peers — E. L. Doctorow, Norman Mailer — pushing the boundaries of genre in this way. Too, he prefigures a younger group of disaffected, drugged, and disillusioned writers, who likewise call "the dream" a "lie": Jim Carroll, Jay McInerney, Brett Easton Ellis. Curiously, Exley's drug-of-choice, alcohol, sets him at odds somewhat with the psychedelic writers of his age, and seems anachronistic, almost provincial, in contrast. Nonetheless, fully inscribed in a gendered, genteel, Eurocentric tradition, Exley never adopts a voice other than what is essentially his: that of a white, male, American writer.

Related Titles

Exley's writing style and substance have changed remarkably little given the score of years it encompasses. His first novel, *A Fan's Notes* (1968), predates by twenty years *Last Notes from Home*, the final tome in an autobiographical trilogy. As with *A Fan's Notes* and *Pages from a Cold Island* (1975), *Last Notes from Home* is narrated by Fred Exley, an admittedly fictionalized protagonist whose character is, nonetheless, largely informed by authorial experience. Because Exley began this tripartite "fictional memoir" relatively late in life, all three volumes are retrospective and focus on recurrent concerns and epochs. Consistent, too, is the author's postmodern paradigm for writing fiction, his use of nonlinear narrative chronology, and his thematic emphasis on psychic incompleteness.

Inasmuch as Exley's novels do differ, it is tone that sets each apart: *Last Notes from Home* is far less bitter in its condemnation of the American Dream than Exley's two prior volumes and, at the last, more hopeful. Many reviewers have found *Pages from a Cold Island* a whining reiteration of "what seemed spontaneous in *A Fan's Notes*." Exley's novels differ most notably in that each revolves around his interactions with specific foils—"historical" characters set up in contradistinction to the narrator. *Last Notes from Home*, along with *A Fan's Notes* and *Pages from a Cold Island*, form one long, bawdy, lusty, confessional, and fantastic romp through the maze of one man's quest to understand himself and those around him.



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