Lightning Bug Short Guide

Lightning Bug by Donald Harington

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Contents

Characters

Lightning Bug has three main characters: Latha Bourne, Every Dill, and its mysterious narrator, Dawny/Donald who appears as two characters. Latha is a beautiful and exceptional woman. She looks, in the narrator's mind's eye, like Vanessa Redgrave in the 1966 film, Blowup. Although she has suffered severe losses, she harbors no bitterness. She is a single woman at one with herself and the world in which she lives. Her general store reflects her. With its plentitude of stock and the post office, it is, as is Latha, the heart of life in Stay More.

Harington has said that he wanted her to be different, a little "peculiar," character traits that are personified in her knowledge and belief in the traditional ways of Ozark life. Vance Randolph described these ways in his Ozark Magic and Folklore (1947, 1964), but Harington's experience in the Ozarks also gave him knowledge of customs, superstitions, and emotions he used in creating his characters.

In addition to believing that she had lost Every after he had raped her, Latha lost her daughter, the offspring of that rape. Latha had gone to her sister's and brother-in-law's in Little Rock to have the baby, but because they were incapable of having children, they connived to make Latha's baby theirs. After Sonora was born, they managed to get Latha committed to the Arkansas State Hospital and, thinking that Latha would never be released, adopted Sonora as their own.

Even though she gets out of the hospital, Latha promised her sister that she would not reveal the truth of Sonora's parents. Consequently, Latha only saw Sonora during the summer months when she came from Little Rock to visit her "Aunt" Latha. In 1939, the now seventeen-year-old Sonora is in Stay More and in love with the young Hank Ingledew. Their romance stirs in Latha her own sexual yearnings so that about a month before Every returns, she had her first sexual relationship in fourteen years, with one Raymond Ingledew. The appearance of that sexual partner on that fateful July Saturday provokes many humorous events as well as a fist fight between him and Every.

The Every who engages in fisticuffs to win the heart of his beloved harkens back to the younger Every, who, from the age of eleven, when he knew he was in love with Latha, did everything he could to be true to that love. When Latha, at seventeen, fell for the good-looking but fickle Raymond, she created a situation that eventually led to a fight between Every and Raymond. When Raymond lost and went off in a huff to join the Army, his five brothers forced Every to join the Army. As he departed for the military, Every promised Latha to find Raymond and bring him back to her. Although he failed, Every risked his life, was wounded, was court-martialed and sentenced to military prison for trying to keep his promise.

Every escaped twice from prison to see Latha. The first time Raymond's brothers ran him out of town for talking with Latha. The second time, when he found Latha still pining for Raymond, he raped her and robbed the bank out of "pure meanness and despair." But he partially redeems himself by boldly rescuing her from the state hospital like "a

fairy tale prince." However, Latha suffered from a form of amnesia and did not remember her rescue. All she knew when she awoke alone in a hotel room in Nashville where Every had taken her was that she was free and on her own.

Every's conversion from a mean hell raiser into a faithful Christian occurred in the same hotel room in which Latha awoke. Although Latha still suffered from amnesia, Every could not restrain from having sex with her, and when she fainted during her sexual climax, Every thought that Latha had died or fallen into a trance. Frightened, Every began searching for something outside himself and found the Gideon Bible. He promised God that if He made Latha completely well, Every would dedicate his life to Him. Latha awoke, completely well, and thinking she had prostituted herself, left the hotel while Every was being baptized; they did not see each other again until they met in Stay More in 1939.

Although the story is told in his voice(s), readers know very little about Dawny and less about Donald. Dawny, who is staying with his Aunt and Uncle Murrison, is a precocious five-year-old and a good liar. He has a dog named Gumper; he loves to listen to Latha tell stories, especially ghost stories. He feels "at home" with her and is envious of Every even though Every "is the one male whom the creator of the story will identify with." About Donald the reader knows that he had an acquaintance from Andover, Massachusetts, that Donald had visited the Arkansas State Hospital to learn about Latha's incarceration, that he is still lost and wanting to be found, that he loves Latha and hopes that this expression of his love for his Lighting Bug (both character and book) will find him.

Social Concerns

Donald Harington has said his writing of Lightning Bug was meant to be a last farewell to the village of Drakes Creek, Arkansas, the place that for him represented the idea of his childhood.

Consequently, the novel deals with the nearly universal experience of losing what one loves and the desire to find a way of restoring that lost love. This desire is akin to wanting to stop time, to triumph over death, as Harington suggests in the name he gives his fictional community—Stay More, Arkansas. Related to this experience of trying to cope with the loss of what one loves is Harington's depiction of the role art plays in the way we deal with loss. Through his intricate method of narration in Lightning Bug, Harington shows how the art of storytelling helps us endure, if not triumph over, loss.

Another concern is how differences might be reconciled, attuned, merged, and made one. In the novel these differences take many forms. Latha Bourne, the novel's heroine, believes in the power of folk superstitions, but Every Dill, the hero, believes in Christianity. There is the difference between the simplicity of the Arkansas Ozarkers in Stay More and the sophistication of those, like the narrator and probably the novel's readers, in the mainstream culture; the difference between "then"—when the action of the story occurred—and "now"—when the telling of the story occurs; the difference between the experience of reading and of listening to a story. Harington reconciles these differences not by juxtaposing but by joining them.

Techniques

Harington uses a unique method of narration to indicate the joining of past and present. He unifies the story's action and its telling by dividing his novel into "Movements" rather than into chapters.

He labels the three main movements "Beginning," Middling," and "Ending."

From one point of view, then, everything in the novel, although printed and apparently always the same, is in motion, like music or like the sound of the human voice. As if to emphasize this quality, the novel begins with a sound, the "WRIRRAANG" of the spring on a screen door being "pushed outward in a slow swing."

Harington also visually heightens the reader's awareness of the past and present through the use of different type fonts and different verb tenses and moods. Both the "Beginning" and "Ending" are printed primarily in italic type and suggest the world of Stay More in 1939. The narrator's comments that suggest the time of telling are usually bracketed and in roman type. He uses the present verb tense in the "Beginning" to help the reader more easily accept the idea that the reader and writer are—here and now—entering into a shared and intimate experience. In the "Ending" the narrator uses the future verb tense to indicate what will happen between the events of 1939 and the time of the telling, between then and now. The structure of the "Ending" by paralleling in reverse order that of the "Beginning" helps to ease the reader out of the story.

Harington unifies the past and the present in the "Middling" movement by connecting each of the five units (or prime units) describing the events of the Saturday in July 1939 with a "Sub" unit that describes events in Latha's earlier life. The prime units are entitled "Morning," "Noon," "Afternoon," Evening," and "Night." They use the past tense and are told from an omniscient point of view. They detail the action that is ostensibly the novel's plot. The "Sub" units, on the other hand, are not subplots but the narrator's subjective, hypothetical views, as the use of the subjunctive mood in "SUB ONE: RECENTLY" suggests, about what Latha might have felt or done. They enable the narrator to delay or accelerate the reader's understanding of the events in the prime units.

That the last "Sub" unit is entitled "NOW" indicates a strong sense of time conflated or doubled so that the reader experiences both the time of July 1939 and the time of telling. From this perspective, the reader can see the characters almost simultaneously in their youth and in their middle age. The narrator's use of direct address with the heroine of the story enhances this sense of conflation or doubleness. The use of direct address, no matter the verb tense, puts the "Sub" units into the time of telling, the time of reading, in both 1939 and now; in other words, in the eternal present.

Themes

Because Lightning Bug focuses on lost love and the desire to restore that love, Harington uses metaphors of marriage and mating to express the reconciliations of differences. The lightning bug of the titie is Latha Bourne, a beautiful unmarried, thirty-eight-year-old woman who, in July 1939—the time of the novel's plot—is the postmistress of Stay More, and, as the narrator says, "the heroine, the demigoddess, of this world," of, that is, the world of the novel. Like the lightning bug, whose flashes signal a desire for mating, Latha calls forth love.

Latha has two main lovers. One is Every Dill, her childhood sweetheart whom Latha believes she has not seen since eighteen years ago when he raped her and robbed the Stay More bank. The other is the five-year-old Donald or "Dawny," as all the folks in Stay More call him, who is visiting his Aunt and Uncle Murrison for the summer. Every evening Dawny comes to the front porch of Latha's general store and sits on the porch swing with her to hear her tell ghost stories, for Latha is an exquisite teller of ghost stories.

Every's return to Stay More as a preacher intent on conducting a revival meeting triggers the action of the novel's plot. It revives Latha's and Every's love for each other, but before they can marry, they must reconcile their different beliefs. As a preacher Every believes he cannot have sexual intercourse with Latha until they marry, but Latha will not marry until she and Every have sexual intercourse. Since this story is "a happy one," they find a way to honor their beliefs, to marry, and, finally, to share their beliefs.

As the narrator tells us, "she will make him superstitious, he will make her religious."

Harington also performed another type of "marriage" when he created the narrator's voice. In that voice, he joined two periods of time—1939, when Dawny experiences both the thrill of Latha's attention, and the loss of that love when Every returns; and 1969 when the middle-aged Donald narrates the story of desire for the restoration of Latha's love and of the world that was his childhood.

These literal and symbolic marriages are examples of reconciliation between opposites, and Harington extends the idea of marriage when he demonstrates through his creation of Latha and his methods of narration the "marriage" of teller and listener, writer and reader. The narrator is, as he describes himself near the end of his story, Latha's "lover and creator." As a character in a work of fiction, Latha is that "airy nothing," to which, in a labor of love, Harington's imagination and pen give "A local habitation and a name." His love for her makes the absent Latha present to him and to his readers. Because the narrator sometimes directly addresses Latha, Latha becomes both actor and observer. Similarly, because Latha is "the lightning bug," she is also both a character in the story and the story itself. This "marriage" is a wonderful example of the restorative powers of the art of storytelling.

Despite such powers, Harington felt, when writing the book and for sometime after, that he was involved in an act of farewell, of saying good-bye forever to Latha and to the world of Stay More.

Thus the story seems to end with Dawny lost in the woods and the people of Stay More out looking for him. The narrator announces that the theme of this ending will be "Of loss and search, of losing and finding, of wanting" and his last words concerning the people of Stay More are that Dawny "will not be there [in Stay More], ever again." Only later, when he was writing his next novel, Some Other Place. The Right Place. (1972) was Harington to discover that the world of Stay More was not lost but was, rather, the right place for him as a writer. Subsequently, all of his novels have had very strong connections with Stay More. Lightning Bug is, then, the beginning and not the end of the very special world that is Stay More.

Key Questions

Some readers may think of Harington's novels as "regional" literature because they are set primarily in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. But what constitutes a "regional" work? Are all of William Faulkner's novels that occur in a single county in the state of Mississippi "regional"? If not, why not? Are the novels of Philip Roth that deal mostly with American Jews who live in the northeastern states "regional" because they concentrate on the customs and language of a particular group of people as do Harington's novels?

What did you know about the Ozarks and the people who live there before you read one of Harington's novels? How do his works confirm or refute your knowledge of the area and its people? Is it significant that, for the most part, Harington's novels are set in a time before World War II? Dreams often play major parts in Harington's novels, such as Latha's dream about the Lord and Jacob's wife's dream about his being Governor. How might these dreams relate to the life of fiction and to one's own life?

1. Lightning Bug is a frame story, where the middle is sandwiched between a beginning and an ending that almost literally "mirror" each other. What methods does Harington use to stir the reader's senses to enter into the story?

2. The narrator says that to him Latha looks exactly like Vanessa Redgrave in the movie Blowup. If you were to make a movie of this novel, who would you cast as Latha? What is it about Latha that you think the actress you chose could best portray?

3. Lightning Bug is the first of Harington's novels to switch tense from past to present to future so that it "ends" in the future and not now. Do you find this device satisfactory in regard to Harington's fiction? Or do you have a strong sense of an ending despite the use of the future tense?

4. What is the quality of the humor in Lightning Bug? Is it satirical? If so, what does it satirize? Is it making fun of the people in Stay More? How does its humor relate to the humor in Vance Randolph's various collections of Ozark humor and folklore?

5. Latha has a firm belief in the efficacy of what the sophisticated call "supersti tion." Do you have some superstitions that you "believe" in? You may want to compare Latha's superstitions with those described by Randolph in his Ozark Magic and Folklore.

6. Does "Dawny" seem to be a "realistic" five-year-old? What might be some reasons why Harington made "Dawny" the way he seems?

7. Does the novel attack Christian belief or does it exemplify in Every the best of Christian belief? Does it attack Latha's beliefs in superstitions? Remember both Every and Latha, like many faithful, are believers in "signs" and their interpretation. Does the narrator express a belief?

8. Latha's fainting at her climax during sexual intercourse is described as a swooning, a type of rapture, which is also similar to the ecstasy experienced by some Christian saints. Is Harington, especially, in Latha's dream, suggesting a comparison between the two types of rapture? If so, to what purpose?

9. What makes Latha so appealing that Harington uses her as a central character in two of his novels?

lO.Why does the reader learn so little about the adult Donald and why is he still "lost" at the novel's conclusion?

11. Why do we hear nothing of Dawny/Donald's parents? His aunt and uncle seem to be surrogate parents and not very good ones at that. Could Latha and Every be the wished-for parents that children often imagine?

12. Dawny got a beating from his uncle because he refused to tell about Latha. Is the telling of Lightning Bug a breaking of Dawny's promise? Keeping promises, as Latha and Every demonstrate, is a very serious business in the novel, so why would Dawny break his promise to tell the story? The keeping of a promise also is an expression of faith, as Every shows in his conduct for all the years after the promise he made to God in Nashville.

Are the writing and the reading of a novel acts of faith?

Literary Precedents

Almost any literary work that seeks to recover lost time, especially the lost time that is childhood, might be considered a literary precedent for Lightning Bug. Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past (1913-1927); Vladimir Nabokov's memoir Speak, Memory (1966); Alain-Fournier's Le Grand Meaulnes (1913; translated as The Wanderer), a novel about the finding of a magic place that is lost and cannot be found again. The one book, however, that Harington seemed to have in mind when planning Lightning Bug, is James Agee's Pulitzer Prize-winning A Death in the Family (1957), especially its opening section "Knoxville: 1915," with its tender evocation of a family, together, out on the lawn enjoying each other and the sounds of a Southern summer night.

Both Agee's and Harington's novels focus on the loss of the sense of wholeness, of love, that for them characterized the essence of "Childhood." In Agee's work this loss is brought about by the death of the father in an automobile accident. Accompanying this loss is the sense of guilt felt by the young son, Rufus, so that Agee's work mirrors the experience of the Christian belief in the Fall, the sin that brought about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise.

Lightning Bug contains some of the tender lyricism of Agee's, but it is, for the most part, a happy and often humorous work. It exhibits a good portion of Ozark bawdy humor and is fairly explicit about sexual matters. Rather than presenting the reader with the death in and of a family, Harington's novel restores a family—Latha, Every, and Sonora. Only the narrator is lost and that, the novel suggests, will not be forever. Another difference between Agee's and Harington's novels is that Lightning Bug, is clearly, at least on one level, a metafiction, a story about storytelling (which accounts for some of its sexual explicitness), while Agee's A Death in theFamily, tends to be a memory work.

Harington has acknowledged that Mary Maclane's "I Have in Me a Quite Unusual Intensity of Life," (from The Inner World of Mental Illness; 1964) and Theodore Roethke's series of poems "Meditations of an Old Woman," gave him insights into Latha's character.

Related Titles

Lightning Bug is related to all of Harington's other Stay More novels, but Some Other Place. The Right Place, with its theme "of loss and search, of losing and finding, of wanting" most clearly relates to Lightning Bug.

In Some Other Place a young woman, Diana Stoving, searches for the life lived by her grandfather, Daniel Lyman Montross. Her search is conducted through a young man, Day Whittacker, who, under hypnosis and through age-regression, relives Montross's life. This early 1970s exploration of a life lived from 1880 to 1953 produces a strong sense of double time, of then and now, similar to that in Lightning Bug. Also, as in the earlier novel, Some Other Place imitates a musical structure with its units being designated movements. Theodore Roethke's poetry, important to Lightning Bug, becomes central to the structure of the novel's third movement, "There and Here," which consists entirely of the volume of Daniel Montross's Selected Poems. Day's and Diana's search for Montross's life takes them to the towns in which he resided.

These towns—Dudleytown, Connecticut; Five Corners, Vermont; Lost Cove, North Carolina; and Stick Around, Arkansas—are now all, except for Stick Around, actual ghost towns. Stick Around is the fictionalized or shaded name of Stay More.

As a reversal of Lightning Bug's conclusion where the characters go in search of the narrator who is lost in the woods, Some Other Place begins with the narrator searching for Diana. Consequently, he traces Day and Diana as they follow the life of Daniel. This pattern of searching is echoed in The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks (1975; see separate entry), Let Us Build Us a City (1986), and The Cockroaches of Stay More (1989). The use of direct address is also reversed in Some Other Place. The Right Place. (1972) by having Daniel in the last movement, "A Dream of a Small But Unlost Town," directly address the narrator. This use of direct address is seen again in Ekaterina (1993) where Montross addresses Ekaterina.

The narrator of Lightning Bug also narrates Some Other Place., as the last movement indicates when Montross tells "G," as he calls him, that he found him when he was lost in the woods. Dawny/Donald or "G" also has a significant role in Ekaterina, only there Montross calls him "I." to disguise or shade "H," the "real" initial. This device of shading that dominates the last movement of Some Other Place and Part One of Ekaterina plays on the novelistic device of not giving the actual name of an actual person or place but rather fictionalizing it. One of the ironies of shading Stay More as Stick Around is the shading of an imaginary place.

Relationships also exist between Lightning Bug and the other Stay More novels.

These connections between the novels enhance the reader's pleasure, but they do not interfere with the reading of any one of the Stay More novels, for each of them stands on its own.

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