Lily White Short Guide

Lily White by Susan Isaacs

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Characters

Lee (Lily) White resembles Susan Isaacs's other heroines more in surface attributes than in personality or character.

Like Marcia Green, Rosie Meyers, and others, she is Jewish, well educated, and a Long Island resident. Like most contemporary women, she can worry about her nail polish or weight in idle moments without losing focus on the serious professional problems she is dealing with.

She also has a gift for sizing up a place's atmosphere or a person's attitude in a few words. Unlike previous Isaacs's heroines, who were merely witty or incisive in their observations, Lee's are often barbed. She is more critical of her relatives than of colleagues in the criminal justice world. And she seems to have no female friends outside that world. However, by the time she represents Norman, she has built up her own domestic circle, including her daughter Val, her ex-husband's brother Kent, a maid and her son, and a varied group of people on the fringe of her unconventional family.

Lee also has a surprising breadth of interests. She gardens, crochets afghans, and attends the Metropolitan Opera. She also can be hurt, although from childhood on she has done her best to hide this fact under a facade of cool competence. Undoubtedly the facade was necessary for her successful legal career, but it has taken a toll in her personal life.

Strangely, four of the most important people in the story are not given full treatment. Norman Torkelson, the murder suspect who is Lee's client, is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. He is tall and Lincolnesque; Lee thinks his very awkwardness makes him more credible to the women he romances. But all she ever knows about his past is what she doggedly puts together from police files scattered across the country. A con man lives as a chameleon, so perhaps this is understandable. About his girlfriend Mary Dean, a beautiful but gaudy and naive young woman, Lee learns a bit more.

Mary talks to Lee about her terrible girlhood and former life as a prostitute.

Norman is the first man to treat her as a person or give her love. Even on the run, she has a better life with him than she knew before. Of course she helps him with his con, but dreams of the day they will be rich enough to quit it.

Lee's sensitive sister Robin, and Jazz (Jasper) Foster, the husband who betrays her with Robin, are treated differently in the novel. Lee—and the reader—know a great deal about their backgrounds. Lee comes to believe they have both grown up spoiled and shallow, but on the surface they are charming people. Underneath? We cannot be sure. Isaacs does not reveal much beneath the surface of this couple.

Perhaps the most likable characters in the book are Will Stewart, the black conservative lawyer who is first Lee's boss, then her good friend and eventually her husband, and

Assistant District Attorney Holly Nunez, whose perkiness masks a sharp mind and surprising political ambition. Will comes vividly to life. We see his impeccable grooming and manners, recognize his deft juggling of different social worlds, even meet his parents, who have some bizarre traits of their own. Holly remains a two dimensional, although delightful, character.

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Social Concerns

Half of Lily White is a murder mystery, drawing on our era's fascination with the legal arena to embellish its basic whodunit question. Lee White's difficulties in seeing justice done lie only partially in putting evidence together to see which pattern fits her case better. Her other struggle is to persuade authorities to reverse themselves and the legal steps they have set in motion, in view of new evidence.

This focus reflects the high-profile criminal cases that have drawn much public attention in the 1990s. After a series of spectacular cases, including the two highly publicized O. J. Simpson trials, legal coverage and commentary have become an integral part of television news and other programming. There is even a nightly panel (Burden of Proof) in which attorneys comment on current cases.

The law was a very "hot" career field in the 1970s, the decade when Lee White attended law school. During this period, the percentage of women in law schools and entering the profession soared enormously. Many of these new women lawyers were not content to stay in the tradi'tional women's areas such as working with small estates and family law. Instead, some specialized in criminal law as Lee White does; others aimed for the lucrative heights of corporate law.

The complexities of social class and ethnic background fill the other half of this novel. These are always at least a background element in Susan Isaacs's novels; in this one they are in the forefront of Lee White's life story. Her whole life has been shaped by her father's determination to overtake his WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) neighbors in wealth, savoir faire, and self-confidence.

Because of the "Jewish mother" stereotype, Lee's own mother's deficiencies bothered her even more. Rather than focusing her life on her children's welfare and activities, Sylvia White was vain, cold, and superficial. At least, the small girl Lily perceived her that way, and the same dynamics carried over into her adulthood.

Such angst, and even the status and identity questions behind them, are not new. But the post-World War II period has seen unprecedented social mobility and changes in how different groups of Americans identify themselves. Since Lily's story covers nearly fifty years, these trends and changes can be glimpsed in its events. As Lee tells Will Stewart at the end of the book (in the 1990s), "I never thought I'd end up with a gay black Republican."

Along with this, Lee's two marriages reflect society's changed attitudes toward intermarriage. A marriage like Lee and Jazz's, between a Jew and a white Episcopalian, was considered a mixed marriage as late as the 1950s. Now, except in religious enclaves and in some immediate families, it is not even remarkable. Lee and Will's marriage, as the union of a white woman and a black man, while still not normative, is no longer as surprising as it was previously felt to be.

While con men preying on lonely women are also not a new phenomenon, Norman Torkelson's mode of operation reflects some new social facts—and worries. He selects possible marks by placing an ad in the personals column. In an earlier era, most people believed that using such advertisements was the last resort of desperate or dangerous people.

Now, many people place or answer them matter-of-factly. The traditional ways to meet prospective dates or partners—through family, church, club membership, or other traditional social gatherings—do not work as well anymore for large numbers of singles. Others answer personal advertisements just as an amusement. This story introduces a low-key warning. Just as in cyberspace—an even newer way to search for romance—not everyone you meet is what he (or she) claims to be. As a sign of social changes, most of Norman's victims seem to have accumulated their money themselves, through work or investments. In past times, a con man who victimized wealthy women was likely to look for widows or heiresses.

Because of Isaacs's close attention to the detail of contemporary life, many other social concerns surface briefly in the story. Among these are drug addiction, the pull of homemaking and child rearing for dedicated professional women, and boycotts of the fur industry.

Techniques

Lily White is Isaacs's most complex book to date. It took her one year to do the outline (compared to three to four weeks each for her other novels' outlines) and two additional years to write. The murder mystery plot came first, Isaacs says, and then she needed to write the other part of the story to know what made Lee who she was.

The book drew mostly positive reviews, except for Time Magazine's, which praised the mystery half but called Lee's life story "whiny" and "the sort of droning stuff therapists are paid to listen to."

Other reviewers described Lee as "toughtalking, marshmallow-hearted" and said the entire book was great fun to read.

Some found it humorous. Others consider it her most serious novel. The author herself says she cannot judge these qualities in her fiction, but goes on to explain that one of her goals was to show the life of a strong woman.

Like Isaacs's other books, its sales figures have been high from the first day of publication. Lily White has a great deal of audience appeal. However, more than a few readers have echoed Time's opinion.

The consensus of these readers seems to be that, even though they enjoyed Isaacs's storytelling, they did not find Lee a sympathetic character. A typical comment is that she comes across as strong at work, but as mean in her personal life—"and there is a difference," adds one reader.

When reader reaction splits this way it is often due to more than personal taste.

Possibly the book has that "love it or hate it" quality that brings a novel controversy (and more sales). But since the book has not been publicly controversial, and both sets of readers seem to like it, there may be something else going on.

The clue to this "something else" seems to lie in the novel's dissonant techniques.

Lily White uses a dual time line, with the chapters alternating between Lee's past (personal life) and present events (mostly concerning the Norman Torkelson-Bobette Frisch murder case). These two story lines are brought together in the last chapter.

Such a novelistic technique is not unusual. Sometimes it is used in complex novels where past events have a major impact on what is going on in the present time line. Usually they converge in the novel's climax or denouement The relation between the two sets of events not only becomes visible, but may then be revealed as almost inevitable. More rarely, the convergence is of theme rather than of major events. In these cases, parallels between the two stories in the two time lines are generally shown all the way through the book.

Authors often mark off the two different time lines by using a different narrative voice and point of view in each of them. Isaacs follows this practice, at least formally. The present-time events are related by Lee White in first person point of view. The past events of Lee's personal life are told from a third person semi-omniscient point of view. However, the narrative voice of these chapters seems also to be Lee's. It is an unusual and jarring combination, which may account for the unease some readers have felt about Lee/Lily's character. For example, on Lee's graduation day: "A happy day? Not for Leonard . . . He knew now: He was doomed to be forever locked out of the world he yearned to enter. His elder daughter could feel at home in the Ivy League. He could only pay the bills .

.. His navy blazer was exquisitely tailored.

Gray flannel slacks. Loafers burnished until they gleamed the consummate loafer tone between mahogany and umber . . .

Inadvertently his hand soothed his lapels, stroked his tie ... He looked so wrong .

. . He bowed his head in shame." Isaacs's aim with the telling detail is so exact that one can grasp immediately both the visual and the emotional connotations. It is only afterwards, and perhaps subconsciously, that one begins to wonder: How did Lee know what her father was thinking the day she graduated from Cornell?

He is not likely to have told her these things. And why are almost all such glimpses into her parents' or her sister's emotions and thoughts negative ones? In a true omniscient passage, surely there would have also been some thought about what his daughter's graduation meant to Leonard—if not pride, at least relief that she had made it through the crazy 1960s and earned that all- important Ivy League diploma.

Oddly, while the narrator describes other family members' motives and thoughts, very few of Lee's own feelings about anything come through directly. At best they are told rather than shown. The passage after Jazz and Robin reveal their affair is powerful: "Lee was astounded at her own clarity, that a part of her—the lawyer, the wronged wife —was taking notes while the rest of her crumbled into pieces, like the dying leaves she had crushed just minutes earlier." .But, it is almost the only time in the entire book Lee reveals genuine emotion.

The semi-omniscient narrator never ventures into Jazz's mind. The reason is unclear. Perhaps Isaacs merely felt unsure about her ability to write from a young man's perspective. (All but one of her protagonists have been female.) Or perhaps she knew that any glimpse inside Jazz's mind would tell a different story.

Jazz must have been stung by his wife's contempt. His father-in-law embraced him as the son he never had, and frail Robin seemed to need him much more than Lee did. Such thoughts would show him in a better light than fit the story Isaacs tells.

In bringing the two parts together at the end, Isaacs again treats them in an unusual manner. The only secret from the past which comes out is the identity of Lee's "my guy."

This does not come as much of a surprise, and it has little impact on the murder-mystery plot.

There is a certain thematic unity in the contrast of Lee, a woman who survives, with Bobette, another independent woman, who does not. A stronger thematic connection, however, is found between Lee's life and that of Mary Dean. We are not told much about Mary's past, except that she escaped from an abusive home as a teenager and supported herself as a prostitute until she met Norman. Despite the vast differences in their backgrounds and present lives, both women are survivors. Both have managed to change their situations through their wits, nerve, and determination, And even so, both end up in a partnership that, while satisfying in many ways, falls far short of their dreams.

Themes

The basic theme of this big novel is surprisingly simple, but forceful nonetheless: Even smart, tough women can be fooled; some of them survive; some do not.

Exhibit A of the women who do not is Bobette Frisch, a fifty-something businesswoman who had built up a small empire of three bars and two apartment buildings. She collected their receipts daily, in person, and was known as a no-nonsense, unimaginative solid citizen.

Bobette did have an imaginative side, however, that she hid in the fussily feminine decor of her home and the all-purple tones of her bedroom. It was as if all her life Bobette had been waiting for the right man to find her inner sanctum and sweep her away. When she meets Norman Torkelson via a personals ad, she apparently decides he is the one. But Norman is a con man who romances lonely middle-aged women, then disap pears with their money. Usually all they lose is their life savings, but Bobette loses her life.

Whether she was murdered because she had last-minute doubts about Norman or because Norman's girlfriend Mary feared he really would marry his latest mark, forms the heart of the mystery. But it is not central to the theme. Bobette was not nearly as smart or tough in matters of the heart as her public persona would indicate. She paid with her life.

The protagonist, Lee (nee Lily Rose) White, is an aggressive and successful criminal defense lawyer. In getting to her midlife success, though, she also has been fooled repeatedly in matters of the heart.

There were minor disappointments like most people have: realizing that her bright, genial husband would never become a hotshot attorney; choosing a "perfect" house on Long Island only to learn that her husband and father had already bought it for her. But Lee took these disappointments very hard; she felt that her husband was pressuring her to move from exciting Manhattan back to Long Island, so they could live a "normal" suburban life.

When her daughter is three years old, Lee discovers she has been fooled even more hurtfully. Her husband Jazz is having an affair. Worse, it is with her sister Robin, whom he is now determined to marry. Whether Lee's earlier reactions helped create this last, biggest betrayal is another mystery, one left for the reader to decide. In any event, after the divorce Lee breaks off contact with her parents as well as with Jazz and Robin.

By telling the whole story in Lee's voice, the author presents Jazz as a shallow, amoral man who chose his wife's sister as a lover so he could retain his position in the now-prospering White family and in its fur business. An alternate reading, which is at least as plausible, based on Jazz's own actions, is that he is a "nurturing male" with a drive to provide emotional as well as material support to the woman in his life. When Lee not

only rejects such support but disparages him for his laid-back, nurturing traits, it is almost inevitable that he becomes drawn to her sister, who is very emotionally "needy."

In her professional life, Lee takes pride in her toughness. She knows most of her clients are guilty, even when they think their stories will fool her. Her job is simply to get them the best deal she can.

Knowing that Norman Torkelson is a master con artist, she feels immune to his charm. She is not emotionally needy in the same way as the women who answer his ads. What she does not count on is his uncanny ability to spot what does motivate her. He very subtly, appeals to her sense of justice, her thoroughness in checking evidence and mentally working out all the alternate scenarios that could fit. As a result, Lee gets him sprung from jail and his girlfriend arrested for the murder. Norman is out of town and gone to ground several days before Lee realizes what has happened.

This sequence of being fooled, which takes up half the novel, is not so traumatic to Lee as her personal disappointments. Her life was never in danger, nor even her reputation as a good defense attorney. Her colleagues assure her that every lawyer, even the best, makes mistakes. Still, her pride is hurt. She broods a bit, but is soon back at work, thinking she is one of the lucky ones who learns from experience.

Some other characters illustrate the same theme. Holly Nunez, the Assistant DA who is Lee's opposite number on the case, is also flummoxed twice by Norman's tricks. She is just as tough and determined as Lee, if less personally involved, and she manages to turn these events to her own use. She ends up winning the next election for District Attorney, on the basis of being willing to admit to a mistake.

It is also possible to detect a somewhat off-center theme of family in both halves of the story. Most of its characters' families come from dysfunctional families, or at least so they believe. Later on, they seek out or try to create a substitute that provides the love and security they most need. This is what Lily does when left in the big house with Kent and her daughter Val. She builds a part-time unconventional family from friends, colleagues, and employees. Likewise, Mary Dean is trying to build a semblance of family for herself, and she stays with Norman because he is the only man who has offered her respectability and a kind of love. Helping with his cons is just a down payment on her dreams of future domestic bliss.

Despite the mystery plot which is set squarely in the midst of the criminal justice system, no big themes emerge about crime, justice, or their relation to society. Most defendants whom Lee represents are guilty and get as good or better justice than they deserve. Nor do the gritty scenes in jail rooms prompt any larger message about prison conditions or reform. Everyone, including inmates and their lawyers, just wants to get away from them as fast as possible.

Adaptations

A fourteen-tape audio version of Lily White has been issued by Blackstone Audio Books. Movie rights have been optioned by Walt Disney Productions for Whoopi Goldberg.

Key Questions

Lily White uses elements from several different genres. A discussion which starts out with the mystery and legal questions is likely to diverge onto Lee's own life story, and vice versa. With either focus, though, the human factors are paramount.

Isaacs does not try to make a larger statement about how our criminal justice system works. There are no hints of how vulnerable a woman like Mary is to the vagaries of the courts, for instance. Instead, this part of the story concentrates on the "whodunit" aspects.

Lee's personal life story, on the other hand, is full of larger social questions. Are the social class-cum-ethnic identity worries that shaped Lee's childhood a permanent feature of American life? Does the growing prominence of women in confrontational fields like law mean more women who are not afraid to show they are "tough"? Or will the women help transform the fields, as Holly Nunez seems poised to do? Is it impossible for a woman with a demanding career like Lee's to succeed in a traditional marriage?

Isaacs's novels always carry a subtext of cultural conundrums like this. Lily White is especially rich in them.

1. Do you think that Mary had actually worked out a plan with Norman before she "confessed" to choking Bobette?

Why or why not?

2. Is Norman's operation—getting lonely women to fall so hard for him that they offer him their life savings within nine days—plausible? Why is he so successful with it?

3. Would Norman's tactic of pretending to take the rap for Mary have worked as well with a male attorney? How about Mary's tactic?

4. Do you think Norman and she will ever settle down into the "normal" domesticity Mary yearns for?

5. Leonard White seems totally preoccupied with social climbing and his wife Sylvia with superficial matters like clothing styles and home decor. Is this couple a parody?

6. Why do you think Robin was so susceptible to Ira's warped lifestyle?

Should, or could, law or society provide any better support for dealing with a situation like the summer from hell when Robin and Ira stay holed up in her room?

7. Do you believe Jazz and Robin when they say they fell in love from the first time they saw each other? Could this have been a recasting, in hindsight, of emotional reactions that were originally something else?

8. Is there anything Lee might have done earlier to avoid the destruction of her first marriage? If so, what?

9. Do you think Lee would have ultimately reconciled with her parents and sister if her second marriage was to a brilliant, successful white attorney?

10. How do you account for Will's parents' inability to take pride in their son's accomplishments?

11. In American fiction, an independent, ambitious woman who attains her career goals usually fails to sustain a "normal" marriage. Lee seems to exemplify this pattern even in the 1990s, by ending up in a marriage without sex. Is this message realistic? Is this a case where real life is ahead of fiction's portrayals? Can you think of novels which break with this fictional pattern?

Literary Precedents

Lily White has features in common with several categories of popular fiction. Its mixing-and-matching is so organic, though, that finding any direct influence from another work is unlikely.

The murder-mystery aspect is drawn from the detective genre, a favorite source of plots for Isaacs's work. Lee's profession, and some of the problems she has to solve in the murder case, are reminiscent of the legal thrillers of John Grisham and similar writers. Lily White's own life story resembles another group of subgenres entirely. It owes something to the school of women's fiction which shines an intense ray on family interactions. It also has faint echoes of the personal memoir, a form that languished for . many years before becoming newly popular in the mid-1990s. The plight of those trying to fit into the self-assured world of WASP old wealth and privilege has been treated often in American literature; F. Scott Fitzgerald's work is perhaps the most famous example.

Other connections appear when the novel is seen as a tale of a strong woman dealing with life on her own terms. Scarlett O'Hara is another heroine in this mold; both women used the methods and tactics available to them in order to survive. The protagonists of Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1977; see separate entry) and Her Mother's Daughter (1987; see separate entry), like Lee, are women who have struggled for autonomy and professional success. Although they reached their goals, all three women seem to have paid a price. French's heroines end up alone in midlife, and Lee has a marriage which, while warm and intellectually stimulating, lacks a sexual bond.

Related Titles

There are no directly related tides.

However, Lily White contains several typical Isaacs elements: a mystery structure (also used in Compromising Positions, 1978; Magic Hour, 1991; and After All These Years, 1993; see separate entries for each); a faithless husband (Shining Through, 1988; see separate entry, and After All These Years); a Long Island or Manhattan setting (virtually all of her novels). The would-be upwardly mobile Jewish family is also a feature of most of Isaacs's novels.

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