

Little, Big Short Guide

Little, Big by John Crowley

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Characters

Smokey Barnable is the central character of *Little, Big*, who, in the opening pages, forsakes his job checking the accuracy of names and addresses for the phone company and sets off on foot to Edgewood where he will marry Daily Alice Drinkwater and thereby associate himself with the shadowy fairy Tale. Smokey believes himself to be a person without character, and only after his marriage to Daily Alice does he come to realize he has acquired one. His marriage has given him entrance into the master plot of the fairy world, and his new character is a kind of gift. Never able to see the fairies and never convinced of their existence, Smokey plays out his part without knowing what it is. His part, however, is by no means insignificant, and at the end of the novel he succeeds in restarting an orrery (a mechanical model of the solar system) on the top floor of the house at Edgewood, reestablishing harmony between Earth and the heavens. Though he discovers himself unable to travel with Daily Alice, the rest of his family, and friends into the fairy world at the end of the novel, Smokey passes out of the Tale happy and wise.

Smokey Barnable is not the only character in the novel who experiences difficulty in discovering his part in the larger scope of the Tale. His son, Auberon Barnable, goes off to the city, falls in love, and then loses his beloved. Lost in the tale of his life as well as the family Tale, Auberon came close to self-destruction until he is finally reconciled to his part. Crowley's world is peopled by eccentrics whose actions fulfill necessary parts of the Tale.

Among the other members of Smokey's family are Auberon Drinkwater, who spends years trying to capture on film the fairies other members of his family can see, August Drinkwater, who, despairing of his fairy gift of irresistible sexuality, attempts suicide by drowning and is metamorphosed into a silver trout, John Storm Drinkwater, who has reached financial success as a writer of children's stories about animals, but who claims merely to transcribe the stories that mice, birds, and insects tell him; and various fairies, elves, gnomes and enchanted folk. All of these characters are necessary to the success of the mysterious Tale whose purpose is to strengthen the fairy world against the encroachment of humankind's expanding dominion.

Never explicitly explained, the Tale does come to an end at the conclusion of the novel in a fairy parliament at which the characters of the tale assume new mythic roles.



Social Concerns/Themes

The individual's place in the framework of the larger world and the attendant difficulty of growing up amid complexity and confusion in both family and society are at the heart of Crowley's *Little, Big*. The novel, a family history spanning five generations, traces the lives and struggles of the descendants of John Drinkwater and Violet Bramble and the parts family members play in a complex centurylong Tale which involves both the Drinkwaters and the fairy world. The novel's title suggests both of the author's themes. *Little, Big* describes the relationship between small individual lives and the complicated structure of the large world, the Tale made up of many millions of lives. It describes the process of growth, not just in size, but in maturity as well, the often painful movement from innocence to experience.

Crowley presents these themes through a remarkably complex plot that involves generations of Drinkwaters, their friends, and neighbors. It is the Drinkwater family that holds a special relationship with the fairy world, an illusive other-world that intersects the human one in and about the curiously designed Drinkwater house at Edgewood. Most of the Drinkwaters know they have been chosen to play a part in the slowly unfolding fairy Tale, yet each character is unaware of the significance of his or her life in the larger scheme of the Tale.

Crowley moves back and forth through the generations of Drinkwaters, tracing their individual growth as well as their difficulty in understanding their role in the fairy Tale. These two major themes are linked to two lesser themes, politics and memory. Crowley ties the political theme to a war between the fairy and human worlds, explaining the decay in the political order as an assault by the fairy world on their enemies. As part of their war plan, the fairies call Frederick Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor, back to life and enlist his aid in the destabilization of the social order. Taking the name Russell Eigenblick, Barbarossa presides over the economic ruin of the United States and in the process reawakens his desire for power. The other theme involves the classical art of memory that was used to assist orators in ordering and memorizing material for later recall before the invention of the printing press.

Crowley asserts that these memories, once stored through this art, take on their own life, resulting in altogether new insights and combinations. For Crowley, memories are alive and changing.



Techniques

Crowley writes a fantasy novel, but a fantasy novel far more complex than those representative of the genre. Not content with solely chronicling events that transpire in a made-up world, Crowley presents the fairy world in conflict with the real world. In addition to elements of the fantasy novel and the fairy tale — for this is an adult fairy tale — Crowley manipulates other genres with great skill. The novel can be read as a bildungsroman, a novel which traces a character from adolescence to maturity, as well as a family saga, like Joyce Carol Oates's *Bellefleur* (1980). *Little, Big* contains sections which display Crowley's skill in other forms, including the children's tale, the romance, and the political intrigue.

Combined, these various genres result in a stylistically sophisticated and beautiful novel.

Little, Big, although it bears many similarities to Crowley's earlier work, does depart from those novels in form.

The earlier pieces have been classed as science fiction; this novel, according to Ursula K. Le Guin, "calls for a redefinition of fantasy." Crowley's blend of fairy tale, myth, legend, and everyday life signals this need for redefinition.

Crowley claims that the novel is composed in a manner similar to a set of Chinese boxes, little ones contained neatly inside larger ones; in this same way, memories are contained by the characters in *Little, Big*, and those characters are enclosed by the larger fairy Tale.

Key Questions

Crowley's storytelling ability and the complexity of his themes in *Little, Big* usually spark reader interest and result in active discussion sessions.

With a tale that encompasses the lives of several generations of a family, discussion leaders may want to begin with a review of the relationships of the major characters in the novel.

Readers are often struck by the existence of two levels in the novel, a realistic level in which characters interact with each other in a seemingly normal manner and a fantasy level in which the rules of conventional behavior seem to be suspended. Discussion groups may find it useful to separate the two levels, first pursuing, for example, the husband and wife relationship of Smoky and Daily Alice, then investigating how each character interacts (or fails to interact) with the fairy world. A technical matter worth talking about is the commonplace tone Crowley employs to present material that is anything but commonplace.

Does his tone make the fantastic elements more believable?

Little, Big is a story and a novel about storytelling. Discussion members may enjoy trying to establish what the "fairy tale" of the novel is all about.

How do the "little" characters fit into the "big" tale being told? The concept of time and its passage is quite important as well. Finally, readers may enjoy focusing on Crowley's Edgewood.

What does it look like, and how do the people that live there behave? The relationship of humans and fairies to the natural world may have much to reveal about Crowley's themes.

1. Crowley's novel is filled with literary allusions. For example, Auber on and Titania are the names of the king and queen of the fairy court in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Can you identify other literary allusions? What purpose do these allusions serve?

2. What is Crowley's attitude toward the city and the country? How is this attitude presented in the novel?

3. Smoky Barnable eventually comes to think of himself as a character. How does this conception of himself as character fit with the greater Tale told by the fairies?

4. Some characters believe in the fairy world and some do not. Does their belief or lack of it distinguish them as good or evil characters?

5. Why does Crowley portray the fairy world so matter-of-factly?



6. What is the significance of the title of the novel, Little, Big?
7. The relationship between Daily Alice Drinkwater and Smoky Barnable is quite complex. Is their marriage successful? Happy?
8. How does the design of the house at Edgewood parallel the fairy tale events of the novel?
9. When Russell Eigenblick gains control of the United States, the country is thrown into a chaotic state. What forces are marshaled against Eigenblick?
10. The Parliament of Fairies resolves the events of the novel. Is this a satisfactory conclusion? Are all the loose ends tied together?

Literary Precedents

As a fantasy, Crowley's novel fits into a tradition established by George MacDonald in *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith*. Critics have compared *Little, Big* as well to the Gormenghast trilogy of Melvyn Peake, the fantasies of Ray Bradbury, and the work of the magical realists, in particular Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Indeed, Crowley's novel seems to echo many other earlier fantasy works. In particular, it acknowledges its debt to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1595-1596) as well as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).



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