Little Kingdoms Short Guide

Little Kingdoms by Steven Millhauser

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Characters

Franklin is the portrait of the misunderstood artist. He is the artist who sacrifices his own health because of the importance of his art and his purpose. He is a stock character in this regard, but he gains depth through the fertility of his imagination and his recognized duty to his wife and child, which causes him a measure of remorse. He is a sympathetic character, patient and understanding with the villainized boss, and even understanding of Cora, who is the antithesis of his imaginative creation. Cora, on the other hand, represents the stifling nature of close-minded people who refuse to recognize the validity of "lower" forms of art—such as cartoons, television, and advertisements—as worthy areas of concentration and study. Her eventual move to be with Rex is expected as throughout the story she seems to be solely discouraging of Franklin's pursuits. She is not painted in an entirely unsympathetic way, as Franklin continues to love her, but the necessity of losing her for the sake of his art is the important response to her departure. Stella, on the other hand, is another stifled genius who benefits from Cora's absence. She comes out of her shell and begins to explore her own artistic pursuits, creating a comic of her own and wanting to take piano lessons.

In an effort to reconcile the opposing forces in her life, she merges the two arts of her parents, drawing and playing the piano, as a gesture of her ties to both. She begins to replace Cora for Franklin, becoming almost the wife that he should have had all along—she encourages his art and allows him the distance that he needs, while remaining supportive and present when he needs her attention. Her matronly actions irk Franklin, but it is most likely disapproval of the situation (caused by himself and by Cora) that has led her to be in such a position.

This idea of extreme closeness between family members is also a facet of "Catalogue of the Exhibition." The narrator of the story repeatedly denies that the close relationship between Edmund and Elizabeth, as evidenced by their refusal to part and their almost psychic connection, is anything unnatural, but the emotional picture that is drawn cannot help but suggest a more than sibling relation. This is not an uncommon suggestion; there have been examples in the past of suggested pairings (for example, the alleged relationship between sisters Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell), and the effect here, especially in the case of Edmund and Elizabeth, is to separate these characters from the society in which they live, essentially mirroring the physical move that each of the artists makes, Franklin to his tower and Edmund to his cottage. Although not an artist herself, Elizabeth is similar to Franklin in her utter devotion to the art that she values. She is fascinated with that which disturbs her and is able to create a response within her. She faithfully serves Edmund and provides one of the only sources of information about Edmund and his work. Her faithfulness becomes a detriment to her well-being in the end and eventually causes her death.

Although not fatal, the princess of the second novella experiences a similar effect of faithfulness to a less-than-worthy partner.

She is led by her devotion to wrong another, which in turn sets the entire group on a path towards despair and destruction, similar to the effect of Elizabeth's refusal of William's proposal of marriage.

The princess of the second novella is a variation on the stock character of a princess in a fairy tale. She is the purest of the pure, and the most devoted of all, which are standard characteristics of fairy tale princesses, but she reaches a depth of emotional torment that is unusual. The prince, likewise, is granted certain characteristics that are unusual for a fairy tale. The result is an emphasis on the emotional state of each of the characters and an exploration of their psyches, which is usually entirely lacking in the fairy tales from childhood. It seems that Millhauser has taken the characteristics of fairy tale characters and has let them loose to see how people with such characteristics would react and interact if they were presented with "real life" situations rather than having the sole purpose of being a means to a "happily ever after" ending.

Edmund, of the third novella, is again a portrait of a tortured artist, a slave to the perfection of his art. His paintings spring from his tortured soul, and it is in this way that Millhauser again explores the relationship of the artist to his art. This process is complicated by the nature of the narrative in this story, as it is being told by a narrator who is set a considerable way off from Edmund's milieu. It is in this way that Millhauser uses the paintings, in a way as characters themselves, things to which Edmund relates that readers can then investigate for information about his life. The way one looks at Edmund is through shadow images through the story created by the exhibition which is created through the writings of others surrounding Edmund; this is the very nature of his paintings, which show slight images through coats of paint, leaving things questionable and at times utterly unrecognizable.

Social Concerns

The three novellas that make up Little Kingdoms greatly vary in their subject matter—a cartoonist /animator, a fairy tale, and an art catalogue—but the concerns that they touch upon are strikingly similar. Each of the little kingdoms is a realm of art, and through the three different disciplines that are explored, Millhauser raises questions concerning the nature of art and its relationship to the artist that creates it and the society that consumes it. The branch of philosophy known as aesthetics has explored these questions as long as art has existed, and Millhauser adds his own interpretation through emphasizing the stories of the artists themselves.

The kingdom of the first novella, "The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne" features the art of cartooning, both comic strips and animation. The story of this gifted artist begins with a fantastical emergence from his third-floor study onto the roof of his house, thus setting the tone of magical realism for the rest of the story, and in fact, the rest of the collection. Always surrounded by comics and cartoons—whether an editorial cartoon that he must draw for his job at the World Citizen or the animation that grows to his obsession—Franklin thrives in a world of fantasy and imagination. He is an artist who is successful within the milieu of his created worlds, but not in the real world that continually infringes on the time and energy that he would rather devote to his creations. As he gets deeper into the process of creating a cartoon, he becomes exhausted and physically ill, as the energy from his real life is pumped into the cartoons he creates. The boundary between art and life moves for Franklin, and as the lines blur, Millhauser's fiction becomes equally ambiguous. This occurs especially towards the end, for as Franklin reaches a fever pitch with his longest and most intricate cartoon, the world outside seems to melt away as he is drawn further and further in to his own cartoon-worlds.

The descriptions of Franklin's cartoons echo the feelings demonstrated by his isolation in his study and in the memories of his father. As Franklin continues to obsess over his art, he neglects those around him. This takes its toll, and his wife, Cora, leaves him for an artist who is based more in reality and thrives not on his art, but the use of art for practical purposes, namely, making a profit. The only person who truly remains connected to Franklin throughout, and who becomes even more of a stabilizing figure as the story wears on, is his daughter, Stella.

Franklin realizes that he must be faithful to his art, for that is his legacy, just as the legacy of his father remains with the emergence of images from the pure white of photographic paper. The purpose of art is lost with Rex, who sees it only as a means to an end, cutting corners when he can, whereas for Franklin, part of the beauty of the art is the process itself.

There is a similar consideration in the second novella, "The Princess, the Dwarf and the Dungeon." In this story, the art is that of storytelling, and the artist is the community itself. In this case, the final product varies tremendously from telling to telling, but it is the process that is most revealing about the community's basic ideology.

Through the way that the community chooses its stories and the manner in which it tells the story, one can begin to understand the nature of the community itself. The community uses its story to remember its history, enforce its present, and imagine its future. Cultural stories are devices that link people to their surroundings, to their history, and to each other. They are also a way of maintaining the status quo and settling minds that fear the invasion of outside forces that could wreak havoc on their way of life. An example of this is the repeated assertion of the ability of the town to defend itself. This is significant to the community because it is used to set minds at ease, yet the threat of the margrave remains within the story to encourage vigilance.

"The Princess, the Dwarf, and the Dungeon" takes the form of oral tradition; it is fragmented and composed of short, focused vignettes or themes. It is in this manner that Millhauser is able to demonstrate an instance of community story-telling, which is not consistent or smooth. Stories come into being through mixing, forgetting, creating, and repeating, each reflecting a cacophony of voices, rather than one authoritative voice.

Through the stories, members of the community create links to each other, through separating themselves from those across the river in the castle and through the shared history that is related in the tales.

The third novella, "Catalogue of the Exhibition: The Art of Edmund Moorash (1810-1846)" tells a story of painting, with an emphasis on the career of one particular artist through descriptions of his artwork gathered together for an exhibition. The story is narrated by one authoritative voice, but the stories themselves relate much more than the background of the paintings. Information begins to be related that has very little to do with the art itself. What results is a portrait of an artist, the disturbing paintings that he creates, and the detrimental effect he has on all of those with whom he is involved. Here, the story again relates the extreme emotional impact that art can have on its creator as well as its viewers. Each of those who have viewed his art regularly, or have met with him regularly (including himself) die within the same year; four of the five people involved with his art die within moments of each other in response to one painting in particular. This effect is the direct opposite effect of the first novella, in which the art is beneficial in at least one way for the artist. In that story, the art brings about reconciliation, rather than chaos. In between the two extremes of art is the second novella, in which the artists benefit at the expense of the characters themselves. In each case, the society that surrounds the art, whether it is a society of one or of an entire town, is susceptible to the whims and effects, good or bad, of the art that it creates.

Techniques

Millhauser finds himself among very good company in terms of experimental forms of narrative. The style of "The Princess, the Dwarf and the Dungeon" is similar to Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities. Invisible Cities presents the stories Marco Polo tells Kubla Khan after he returns from his journeys. The novel is divided into independent sections that are related to each other by their categorization. Likewise, "Catalogue of the Exhibition" is extremely similar in tone, theme, and format to Vladimir Nabokov's novel Pale Fire, in which a fictional poem is analyzed by a fictional critic who claims to be a displaced member of royalty. Questions arise as to the narrator's authority and the creation of a narrative from examples of an isolated piece of art created by the main character of the narrative. Thus, the story of the artist is told by the interpretation of the art he makes. Both Calvino and Nabokov are descriptive in the same vein as Millhauser; all three use intricate descriptions of their own creations to enrich their story and examine their chosen themes.

Themes

One of the themes of "The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne" becomes most clear at the end of the story during the first screening of his most precious cartoon. All of the people that have meant anything to him gather together, and it is his art, the world that he creates out of his imagination that brings them together. This is the power of art for Millhauser; it has the ability to reconcile and remember, even if it is only for an audience of one or perhaps two.

Franklin realizes that no one in the public will ever see his final cartoon, but this is not the purpose of the cartoon. The purpose of his cartoon is to create a legacy of himself, just as his father did with his photographs.

He is creating a link with his daughter through the creation of images from the blank white screen, similar to the link that his father created with him through the creation of images from the blank white photographic paper. The process that allows for animation —"the persistence of vision"—is the very thing that allows a continued link from one generation to the next.

It is this persistence of vision that Franklin is seeking for himself and his daughter.

Similarly, the community of "The Princess, the Dwarf and the Dungeon" links together its individual stories to create a legacy for itself.

Thus, the persistence of vision phenomenon articulates a major theme running throughout the three stories. Franklin's cartoons are composed of a series of still images, and the second and third novellas use a similar technique. The second novella uses smaller stories linked together to create a larger, more complete story. The third novella uses a series of paintings to create a biography. Each of these stories points to the creation of larger stories from smaller ones. What our mind does next is link them together to create a larger, more complete story. This is, for the most part, the way in which readers view their society and their identity. Memories are made up of individual stories, fragments of emotions, and physical sensations that are linked together to form one's view of him or herself and the surrounding world. Likewise, societies are made up of individual people linked together to create a bigger, more complete whole. Millhauser then demonstrates how part of the artist's role is to be able to step back and recognize this, which is precisely what he does in his fiction.

Key Questions

One of the most interesting facets of collections, whether it is a collection of poetry, short stories, novellas, or anything else, is not only being able to deal with each story in isolation, but also finding intersections among the pieces of the collection.

Millhauser uses many of the same themes, motifs, and types of description throughout his fiction. He returns to the fantastic again and again, but always places it in a very particular context, and it is through his very particular lens that images of societies begin to emerge.

1. What are some motifs that run throughout all three novellas?

2. The relation of art to society is very important in all three of these stories.

What are some ways that art intersects with our society and in our daily lives?

What are the similarities between those ways and these stories?

3. What is the significance of Franklin's choice of comic strips and cartoons?

Why would this form of art be used instead of film or sculpting?

4. Does Cora's absence benefit the family? Is her leaving a good or bad thing?

5. In "The Princess, the Dwarf and the Dungeon," Millhauser calls upon the form of the fairy tale, using motifs and iconography from tales of Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, and the like. These stories are told again and again in various forms from those of the Brothers Grimm to James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Fairy Tales.

How these stories are used, then, is telling of the person or community that uses it. What motifs can you pick out of this story and how are they significant?

What is Millhauser trying to do? How does it relate to the other two novellas?

6. The narrator in the second novella explains that the community has developed various ends to their story of the princess. What are some other ways that you think the story could end?

7. How would you classify the relationship between Edmund and Elizabeth?

Should Elizabeth have married William? What effect do you think it would have had? Would the story have ended the same way? What if Sophia had married Edmund?

8. What is going on in America at the time that Edmund is painting? Does his work reflect or respond to any movements or manners of thought that are occurring at this time?

9. The line "In October 1846 Charlotte Vail died, after a lingering illness" ends the third novella and the collection itself. What is the significance of this line? Why end with Charlotte Vail, who seems to be a very minor character in the story?

10. Critics often compare Millhauser to Edgar Allen Poe. Can you find any similarities? In which novella is the connection most striking?

Literary Precedents

Millhauser would best be classified under the amorphous heading of "magic realism." One major author who is synonymous with this type of fiction is Jorge Luis Borges, whose short stories such as "The Babylon Lottery" and "The Library of Babel" mix the fantastical with the banal and everyday in ways that arouse one's imagination and create new discussions surrounding the societies involved and the assumptions that they are based upon. Similarly, Calvino and Nabokov could be considered in this category. Both writers use the methods of this tradition to explore the process of writing and reading, and the creation of meaning from these two processes. Calvino's If on a Winter's Night a Traveler is a very good example of this. An example from another author is Umberto Eco's novel Foucault's Pendulum, in which all of history is at the mercy of rewriting and reconnecting in the search for meaning. Millhauser uses many of the motifs present in Nabokov's fiction, such as the preoccupation with windows, the appearance of dark imagery, and especially the obsession of the main character with worlds that he creates. Two notable examples of Nabokov's work would be The Defense and The Gift.

Related Titles

Millhauser touches on many of the same themes in his other fiction that he is concerned with in these three novellas. His novel Edwin Mullhouse relates the story of a boy genius who dies mysteriously at a very young age and in some ways is very similar to "Catalogue of the Exhibition" in its concentration on one particular artist. A close friend of Edwin's narrates this novel, which is similar to the reliance on Elizabeth's journal for information. Likewise, Millhauser's novel Martin Dressier, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize, takes the form of a biography about an entrepreneur. Millhauser's short stories vary in the use of fantastical elements; "The Visit" from his collection The Knife Thrower and Other Stories is a particular example of mixing the extraordinary with the ordinary.

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