Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock Short Guide

Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock by Jack Butler

Contents

Characters

L iving in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is a large book, more than twice as long as Butler's two previous novels combined, and it includes a cast so numerous that the author has his narrator formally introduce the principal members in the first chapter. Two characters are clearly central: Charles Morrison, 42, wealthy and powerful head of a prominent Little Rock law firm, and his wife, Lianne, 39, the former "Miss Little Rock" of the title and a former well-known Little Rock television personality. The couple are childless because Lianne had a partial hysterectomy at age twenty-one, and in spite of their relatively long marriage, they are still deeply in love. Retired several years from her television job as a result of overwork and stress, Lianne channels her energies into a variety of good causes, in the approved manner of the "modern Southern liberal." It is debatable which, if either, of these characters is the more "central." Butler has insisted that the book is Lianne's story, that she is the principal character, and in some obvious ways this is certainly true. But the construction of her story is achieved largely through the viewpoint of Charles. Indeed, it is possible to interpret the entire novel as Charles's attempt at a thorough reconstruction of her life after her death. So it is his consciousness to which the reader is most fully exposed and his concerns with which the reader is most likely to identify. Other major characters include Lianne's mother Elaine, who abused Lianne psychologically (and to some extent physically) in her childhood and who brings a generally disagreeable presence to those scenes in which she appears. Charles and Lianne's closest friends are Tucker and Dee-Dee, a physician and his wife — also childless, although they will be expecting by the novel's end. Tucker and Dee-Dee prove to be Charles's chief emotional support after Lianne's violent death. Several major characters are associates of the law firm. Tina Talliaferro (pronounced "Tolliver"), a lawyer at the firm who aims her predatory sexual wiles at Charles, is the principal architect of evil in the novel, although her involvement, along with the fraudulence of her law credentials, will not be discovered until the end.

She is like a perverted mirror image — perhaps a "fractal recursion" — of Lianne. Tina has a group of present and former lovers, some of whom are around her in most of her scenes, including Lafayette Thompson, a black member of the firm and former prominent Razorback football player, Greg Legg, a junior member of the firm, and Sonny Raymond, the "Lord High Bailiff of Pulaski County." Tina's ambition is to add Charles to her stable of lovers, but while Charles is sorely tempted, he manages to avoid physical involvement with her. Sonny Raymond is perhaps the most outrageous character in the book. His fanciful title is the equivalent of "sheriff," and his personality and antics might seem unbelievable to anyone unfamiliar with Arkansas politics. He is surely one of the vilest, most foul-mouthed, disgusting, abhorrent — and funniest — characters in contemporary fiction.

Two others must be reckoned among the major characters: Ferrin Dwell and Rubert Bokamper. They are the pair of petty criminals employed by an unknown (until the end) person first to spy on and later to persecute Charles and Lianne. Ferrin and Rubert are excons, white and black respectively, utterly ruthless, whose designs are impeded only

by their bumbling stupidity. Rubert is easy-going, big and strong, a cheerful participant in heinous acts; Ferrin, a weaselike man, is more reflective, the brains of the outfit.

His ancestors, literary and "real," include The Misfit of Flannery O'Conner's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955) and Charles Manson. Together, they are as exquisitely drawn a pair of comic characters as literature has to offer; their actions, however, lead to tragic ends, for themselves and others.

Among the minor characters who play significant roles are J. D. Rider, a friend of Lianne's and the detective who unravels her murder; Ian Farber, Lianne's therapist, whom she thinks of as "Father Christmas"; Clemmie, the Morrisons' teutonic housekeeper; their black gardener, Coleman; and, surprisingly, Jack Butler, who appears only in one scene but whose presence effectively determines the outcome of the plot.

Social Concerns

Specific social concerns are difficult to locate in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, at least among the author's primary interests, for two reasons. First, the novel's broad scope, encompassing virtually all of society in its many and varied characters as well as most of society's major institutions, makes it easier to imagine that society as a whole is the author's principal concern. And so it is, although it is possible to pick out more particular concerns in the interests of individual characters. For example, Lianne Morrison (arguably the central character) is intensely interested in the problems besetting public education in Arkansas and tirelessly campaigns for improvement in this area. In a similar vein, one of the real events underlying the fictional world portrayed here is the passage by the Arkansas state legislature in 1981 of the "Creation Science Bill" — a law that would have required the teaching of "Creation Science" in Arkansas public schools as a balance to the godless doctrines of evolution. The bill was signed by the governor, who acknowledged that he had not read the bill before he signed it, but was ultimately ruled unconstitutional by the courts. The law firm headed by Charles Morrison, Lianne's husband, becomes involved in litigation against the bill, and both Charles and Lianne are personally interested in the matter.

A second reason why social concerns are not prominently obvious in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is that the novel's ultimate concerns are cosmic — theological and philosophical — in spite of the fact that most of the story is narrated from the perspective of individual characters, who are most intensely interested in their own predicaments.

Techniques

As he had done in his two previous novels, Butler in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock devotes major portions of his technical skill and effort to the matter of narrative voice. In Jujitsu for Christ (1986) and Nightshade the self-proclaimed narrators' identities are not fully revealed until the final chapters — Marcus Gandy and the artificial intelligence Mandrake, respectively, although as we have seen, a case can be made for Marcus as the supposedly real "author" of both books. In Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, as in Nightshade, the nominal narrator is a nonhuman entity but is clearly identified from the opening line: "Howdy, I'm the Holy Ghost."

Given what we know of the Holy Ghost's nature and activities from theology and tradition, the possibilities for narrative perspective such a voice provides are inherently limitless. Although part of a larger organization — the "HQ," or "Holy Quaternity," comprising (besides the Ghost) "the Two of Them and Miss Liza Jane," the Ghost is pretty much on Its own here as narrator and relishes the role, as It observes, they "Aint let me run loose since Pentecost." The Ghost is witty, genial, given to abrupt shifts in accent, style, dialect, and tone, and It habitually addresses both reader and characters in first-person intrusions, although the characters are generally not aware of the Ghost. And while the Ghost suggests that It may be the ultimate omniscient narrator, It does have certain limitations, one of which is that the Ghost has absolutely no sense of time.

All time is the same time to the Ghost, eternally present, as it is to the other members of the Quaternity. The Ghost therefore has considerable difficulty in distinguishing beginnings, middles, and ends but is "under orders" to narrate in "time-wordical sequence" for the benefit of readers and does exercise some control over chronology. Even so, the narrative skips around quite a bit from the "moment before creation . . .

the ramalam of first light, the flash and bang and fire that will grow and cool and evolve into our story and age and come round and begin to collapse on itself again in the fire and bang and flash of the light's last ramalam," so that, as in the cosmos the beginning is the end, so in the minute fractal recursion that is the narrative of this novel (for example, the explosion in which Lianne dies is both the end of the story and its beginning — if we interpret the narrative as Charles's attempt to reconstruct Lianne's life after her death), the end is the beginning and things from before, during, and after are always popping up unexpectedly. The narrator's major technical achievement, and Butler's, is to hold events so "chaotically" ordered (that is, ordered by the principles of nonlinear dynamics, the foundation of "chaos theory") in a coherent, or at any rate comprehensible state. In reading the book, the audience must assume some of the narrator's view of time. Through the author's skill, this becomes possible.

A second attribute of the Holy Ghost that helps make It an ideal narrator is Its ability to be "in" the various characters, to inhabit their consciousness and speak through their minds and voices.

Thus the narrator has instant and unlimited access to the memories, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of all characters, as well as the omniscient perspective to evaluate and correlate them. It is a perspective no human narrator could hope to match. Paradoxically, this ability also causes problems for the narrator when It occasionally loses control and in a phenomenon the Ghost calls the "FLIP-FLOP," finds Itself being "sucked into" a character It is not ready to enter or does not even wish to enter. The problems are, of course, the author's design and are part of the fun in following the adventures of this narrator. Moreover, the Ghost's unwilling entry first into Ferrin's consciousness and then into Tina's in Chapters 40 and 41 allows the reader knowledge of Ferrin's future hellish fate as a prison inmate and Tina's drugged, demented, and diseased fantasies in the mental hospital where she will die years later of ovarian cancer, beyond the plot boundaries of the novel.

As far as the larger structural design of the novel is concerned, it may be noted that the book has five major sections or "parts," titled "Elections" (referring both to political elections and to choices the characters make that will determine future outcomes), "Fractal Love" (in which the chapter titles replicate, fractally, the amphimachic rhythm of the section title), "In the Middle of Living" (indicating both plot concerns and location in the book), "Detective Story," and "Kingdom Come." The first and second parts are of virtually identical length with the fourth and fifth parts, and the large "middle" section is preceded and followed by an "interlude," the first "with the Holy Ghost" and the second "without." The Holy Ghost has been "banished" from the tale by Charles's disbelief, and Charles must make it on his own through Part Four, in which the world he faces after Lianne's death is grim and hopeless, a mechanistic world devoid of spirit. To everyone's relief, not least the reader's, the Ghost will return in the final section.

A chapter central in its implications for the novel's meaning (as it is also very near the geographic center of the book) is Chapter 19, titled "Noble Rot."

It is here that the "author," Jack Butler, makes his cameo appearance. He is a baby-faced, ingenuous poet who, as an "Arkansas writer," has been invited to the Morrison home to do a reading for Lianne's book club. Following the reading, Charles, perhaps pitying the poor fellow and intrigued to learn that Butler is a fellow science-fiction fan, invites him to have a few drinks and shoot some pool. (On another level, Charles is diverted from his plan to attend a party at Lafayette's house that evening. His absence from that party will set in motion, or will allow to occur, all major subsequent events in the novel.) This allows Charles and the poet to become acquainted, and they have a spirited if drunken discussion of most of the subjects the novel deals with on a philosophical level: God, computers, the physical nature of reality, and so on. In theorizing about reality, they use the figure of the hypercube, which is also the frontispiece illustration of the novel. The hypercube, imagined in four dimensions, is both a metaphor for the process of fiction and, in its resemblance to the Cross, a symbol of the cross and the crucified together as one being.

This, according to a remark made by Butler, is the meaning of the apparently nonsense word "ramalam" that hovers like an incantation over this novel: the "ram of sacrifice and the lamb of innocence" in a single image.

Ramalam is also the name of Lianne's beloved but deceased dog, which makes a ghostly appearance in Chapter 19. These remarks scarcely scratch the surface of the complexity and intricacy of plot and meaning in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock; the full experience is available only through a careful reading of the book itself.

Themes

Although Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock has the look and feel of "popular" fiction, the author's designs and intentions operate on a somewhat grander level. Butler, in an unpublished commentary he prepared to acquaint prospective publishers with his manuscript, has characterized this book — especially in the way it explores myth, memory, and the relation between fiction and reality — as "something like a cross between The Sound and the Fury (1929) and Ulysses (1922) — with general relativity, quantum mechanics, and chaos theory thrown in." The novels (of William Faulkner and James Joyce, respectively) he cites as influences or possibly models are among the most significant — and difficult — literary works of the twentieth century, a far cry from "pop fiction."

Even more esoteric to most people, including novelists, are the mathematically based sciences Butler incorporates into the design of Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock. Yet he manages both literary and scientific bases with skill and authority, his mastery of the latter no doubt attributable to the fact that he holds a degree in mathematics.

The most accessible, and most pervasive, of these themes is probably the author's concern with the relationship between fiction and reality. The questioning of reality is done mostly by the novel's truly omniscient narrator, who identifies HimHerItself in the book's opening line as the Holy Ghost — a being that transcends time, space, and human perceptions and conceptions of reality and can therefore comment authoritatively on these matters. Ironically, the Holy Ghost questions Its own existence, as well as the reality of the tale in which It appears, not to mention the reality of the reader. At one point, in an interchapter called "An Interlude with the Hog" (the "Hog" being what the narrator says It likes to be called) that includes a dialogue between the narrator and "the reader," the reader complains that the Hog keeps intruding, breaking the fictional illusion of reality. The Hog's response is that "reality itself fades off into mystery at the edges," and that "If you want something to be real, you have to supply some mysterious edges for it to fade off into." When the reader wants to "just get back to the characters," the Hog insists that "I am one of the characters" and tricks the reader into distinguishing between the Ghost and the "real characters." Much later, in Chapter 43, in another familiar address to the reader, the Ghost again describes Its function: "What am I but the curiosity of you finite monkeys, your detective, shade, voyeur, Voyager?" This self-characterization perhaps suggests that we are to understand the narrator as representing the accumulation of human experience, knowledge, and wisdom, imbued with whatever force or impulse it is that constitutes humanity, and possessing the potential to become what the narrator in Nightshade (1989) says humanity became in the course of 30 revolutions of the galaxy: the disappeared "ghost at the heart of things." The Holy Ghost, or Spirit, that is to say, may be identical with the human spirit.

Another pervasive thematic concern of Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is the human propensity for constructing models and images. Theology is thus the "modeling of God," ego the modeling of self, and fiction (and art generally) and science are

different avenues to the modeling of reality. It is here that Butler draws most heavily on "chaos theory," with its investigation of the physics of nonlinear dynamics and turbulent systems and its concepts of "fractal" recursion and self-similarity. Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is therefore filled with images that suggest the creation of models and the image-making process itself, as well as images that suggest turbulent or "chaotic" systems with their mazes of selfsimilarity and recursion (books, dolls, telephones, computers, clocks, televisions, newspapers, weather).

A book that probes, as this one does, the nature of reality cannot be far from considering the question of the existence of God, and indeed that is another of the major themes in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock. Events in the plot raise the old questions — the problem of reconciling the existence of evil and its apparent triumphs with the existence of a "just" God, and so on. The question is not resolved one way or the other, as it never is, but it is brought to a peculiar balance. In an apparent paradox reminiscent of "Schrodinger's cat" (a paradox in physics in which the "cat" is made to seem both to exist and not to exist), it seems that in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock God both exists and does not exist.

Key Questions

Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock may be approached by several avenues. One way would be to probe the intellectual underpinnings of the novel, in the areas of philosophy, religion or theology, and science, although for most people, this would require some investigation. For example, the novel strongly reflects the author's interest in and knowledge of the branch of science called "chaos theory," a prominent feature of which are the ideas of "fractal" recursion and self-similarity. Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is full of instances of both, within the boundaries of the plot and between the plot and real events in the world outside the novel. A good strategy would be to consult one of the popular books on chaos theory and to discuss the ways Butler incorporates these ideas. Something similar might be done concerning theological implications.

Interesting discussion could also arise from a consideration of real persons and real events that are referred to in the novel and a comparison of these with fictional persons and events that exist and occur in the plot. "Real" events include such things as the "Creation Science" bill passed by the Arkansas legislature, the attempted assassination of President Reagan, and — perhaps most interestingly — a famous murder case in which Alice McArthur, the wife of a prominent Little Rock attorney, was killed by a pair of hitmen employed by another woman. This event occurred somewhat later than the time represented as "the present" in the novel, but there are numerous parallels with fictional events. It would be interesting to look up newspaper accounts of the "Alice McArthur murder case," or consult Gene Lyons's factual account of it in his recent book Widow's Web, and make comparisons.

Finally, matters of narrative technique always make for interesting discussion of Butler's fiction. The persona of the narrator in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock — the Holy Ghost — offers abundant possibilities for exploring the ways Butler distances himself from his fiction, preferring to let other "voices" speak for him.

1. This novel raises questions about the nature of reality. Are different "levels" of reality suggested by the different voices that speak in the novel — for example, the voices of the "characters" as distinguished from the voice of the narrator? If these do represent different realities, what is their relationship to the "real" world outside the novel? Do the different levels ever merge and become the same?

2. The major theological peculiarity of this novel is the narrator's reference to a "Holy Quaternity," or four-person godhead, that includes the Holy Ghost, "the Two of Them," and an apparently female member the narrator refers to as "Miss Liza Jane." Who, or what, are these personages, especially the last one?

3. Discuss the implications of the narrator's remarks about time and the way the narrator perceives time. In what ways is the narrator's sense of time reflected in the book?

4. Butler has remarked that God both exists and does not exist in the plot of this novel. This seems paradoxical.

Look up, in a book on mathematical physics (or chaos theory), the paradox of "Schrodinger's cat." Does God both exist and not exist in some way similar to the cat, or in some other sense?

5. At the end of Chapter 29, "Christmas in July," Charles firmly denies the existence of God. In the section that follows, "Detective Story," the realities Charles must face are grim and hopeless, and the spirited commentary of the Holy Ghost is entirely absent. Discuss.

6. Look up several issues of Little Rock newspapers (the Arkansas Gazette and the Arkansas Democrat) from the years 1981 and 1982. Scan them for articles on such topics as the Creation Science bill, the activities of the Pulaski County Sheriff's Department, the appearance of the University of Arkansas basketball team in the NCAA tournament, and other real events that figure in the novel.

7. Compare the Alice McArthur murder case with events in the novel.

Which aspects are most similar? Which are different?

8. The Holy Ghost speaks "in all tongues in all times," but one of Its most prominent "tongues" in this book appears to be black dialect, much like the narrator Marcus Gandy occasionally used in Jujitsu for Christ. Could this narrator "really" be Marcus, masquerading as the Holy Ghost?

9. In Chapter 19, "Noble Rot," a poet named Jack Butler appears to give a reading to Lianne's book club and is involved briefly in the novel's plot. The poet engages in a discussion with Charles on a variety of topics that are more or less prominent in the novel as a whole. What are these subjects, and what is the relationship between Charles and Jack's conversation and the meaning of the novel?

10. In what way or ways does the apparent brief intrusion of the "author" in Chapter 19 influence or determine the outcome of major elements of the novel's plot?

11. In the final chapter of Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, titled "Ramalam," the Holy Ghost tells a story about sentient trees and their encounters with "invisible demons" that move too fast to be seen. The story appears to be a theological allegory.

What does this story suggest in relation to Butler's assertion that the novel's primary symbol, the hypercube, represents the cross and the crucified bound together in a single being?

Literary Precedents

As noted above, Butler has placed in a tradition represented by Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Joyce's Ulysses. In its innovative complexity of narrative technique, Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock fits well with those classics but, naturally, reflects as well the theory and practice of other important writers and other developments in fiction in the mid and later twentieth century. "Postmodern" fiction leaves its mark in the "metafictional" liberties the author takes with traditional fictional representations of reality, as well as in his technical manipulations of narrative voice. The idea of the "unreliable narrator" is here, as in Butler's other novels, carried to new extremes: even the narrator's identity — even his (or Its) existence — is open to question.

Another, more generalized fictional tradition in which Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock operates is the trend (most prominent in the present century) to incorporate and examine scientific theories and cutting-edge technological developments in fiction.

While this trend has naturally been most obvious in science fiction (which not incidentally Butler acknowledges as an important influence on his work), it is increasingly reflected in mainstream and popular fiction. Computer technology and chaos theory, to cite but one example, provide significant plot support and theoretical foundation for Michael Crichton's novel Jurassic Park (1990), which was written about the same time as Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock.

A third tradition strongly reflected in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock is that of "Southern writing," as discussed above in connection with Jujitsu for Christ. Although less obviously regional than the earlier novel, Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, by virtue of its characters (even, or especially, the Holy Ghost) and setting, is still very much within the Southern tradition at the same time it transcends that tradition.

Related Titles

Butler's first two novels are clearly tied to each other, most importantly through the figure of the putative narrator of Jujitsu for Christ, Marcus Gandy. In that novel, Marcus predicted that he would write a novel about "vampires on Mars," in an apparent reference to Nightshade. Connections with Marcus may also be found in Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, but they are more tenuous and for the most part inferential rather than direct. It is suspicious, for example, that one of the many "voices" the Holy Ghost employs in its first-person statements happens to be black dialect — a circumstance that recalls similar "lapses" on Marcus's part as narrator of Butler's first novel. A more direct link to both Marcus and to Nightshade occurs in Chapter 8 of Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock when the narrative voice, presumably the Holy Ghost speaking from Charles's perspective, quotes a remark made by John Shade, the vampire character in Butler's second novel, and actually attributes the quotation to "the vampire": "Money, said the vampire, is just a social code for available energy." Other clues that suggest similar connections are scattered throughout Living in Little Rock with Miss Little Rock, although the author has left the question of such relationships deliberately vague.

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