A Long and Happy Life Study Guide

A Long and Happy Life by Reynolds Price

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Introduction

Upon its first publication in 1962, *A Long and Happy Life* announced the arrival of a major literary talent. Reynolds Price's first novel, published just a few years after his graduation from college, is a tale told in the southern Gothic tradition, regarding the sorrows of a young woman, Rosacoke Mustian, who tries to find love in an obscure rural town. Her long-term boyfriend, Wesley Beavers, is mysterious to her, showing Rosacoke enough interest to make her feel that they might have a true bond but also flirting with other women and ignoring her to such an extent that she often wonders if he knows her at all. Price tells this story with an exacting eye for detail and a firm control of his characters' emotions as they come to grips with the births and deaths that control the courses of their lives. He creates a very specific geographical location, a countryside where whites and blacks, poor and rich, know each other and live together as neighbors, and where the surrounding forest is still wild enough to raise the sense of wonder in people who have known it all their lives. Since the publication of *A Long and Happy Life*, Reynolds Price has distinguished himself as a poet, fiction writer, essayist, and playwright. While all of his works have been important to the American literary scene, this novel remains one of his most significant contributions.

Author Biography

Reynolds Price was born on February 1, 1933, in Macon, North Carolina. His father, William, was a traveling salesman; his mother, Elizabeth, was a homemaker with a quirky, eccentric personality that came to play a direct influence on the focused sense of storytelling that Price was to develop. The author spent his childhood in small North Carolina towns, a fact that shows clearly in his fiction, which is most often concerned with the lives of characters from the Carolina backwoods. His talent as a writer manifested itself early, and it opened doors for him that would change the course of his life. He attended Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, on a scholarship and was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend Oxford University in England. After graduating from Oxford in 1958, Price became an instructor at Duke, and he has remained with Duke ever since then, rising from the level of instructor to chair of the Department of English.

A Long and Happy Life was Price's first novel, published in 1962. It was critically acclaimed, winning several awards for a first novel, and established the author as a major American literary voice. Since then, he has published frequently in a range of genres: novels, plays, poetry, short stories, memoirs, and essays.

A major event in Price's life occurred in 1984, when he was diagnosed with astocytoma, or cancer of the spinal cord. Tests determined that there was a tumor on his spinal cord that had been there a long time, possibly all his life. The subsequent operation to remove it left Price paralyzed in both legs. This change in his lifestyle created a change in his writing style, as he outlined in 1995 in his book *A Whole New Life*. For one thing, having limited mobility left him more time to write. In addition, his works became more introspective and focused more on religious themes. In 2001, Price published *A Great Circle: The Mayfield Trilogy*, a collection of three novels—*The Surface of the Earth*, *The Source of Light*, and *The Promise of Rest*—spanning almost two hundred years in the history of one North Carolina family.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

A Long and Happy Life takes place in rural North Carolina. It begins in July, with the novel's protagonist, Rosacoke Mustian, riding to a funeral on the back of a motorcycle driven by Wesley Beavers, her on-and-off boyfriend of six years. The funeral is for Mildred Sutton. Mildred played with Rosacoke's family when they were all little, but recently the two young women had not seen much of each other. Mildred died giving birth to a baby, having never told anyone who the child's father was. Rosacoke is embarrassed to ride to the church on a loud motorcycle, but Wesley sees "no reason to change to a car for a Negro funeral." During the ceremony, he stays outside the church, tuning the motorcycle loudly. Rosacoke is the only white person at the ceremony. Wesley rides away during the funeral, and when Rosacoke leaves she has to walk home.

In the woods, she stops at a clear water spring that she recalls finding when she and Mildred and others were playing as children. Wesley finds her there, thinking about her life, and convinces her to go to the church picnic with him.

Rosacoke's family is at the picnic by Mason's Lake. Her brother Milo swims with Wesley and with Willie Duke Aycock, a buxom beauty contest winner who has had a crush on Wesley since childhood; Milo's wife Sissie, pregnant with their first child, feels sick and is cared for by Rosacoke's mother; Baby Sister, the youngest of the clan, pretends to baptize the many children of another family, the Guptons; and Macey Gupton's wife, Marise, tends to the couple's fourth child. Wesley explains that he will be going to Norfolk, Virginia, where he was in the navy, to sell motorcycles. He jokes around about other women he has known. Milo jokes that Rosacoke could keep Wesley committed to her by becoming pregnant.

After everyone leaves the picnic and night is falling, Wesley lures Rosacoke into the woods, pretending that he is looking for a spring to drink from. He tells her that Willie Duke Aycock will be going to Norfolk when he does because she has a job there. In the woods, he tries to convince Rosacoke to have sex with him, but she refuses.

For a few weeks, Rosacoke writes letters to Wesley, and he responds with flighty, noncommittal post cards. Willie Duke returns in November with a new, wealthy boyfriend. It is a few days before Rosacoke finds out that Wesley came back to town with them.

Chapter 2

At church, Willie Duke introduces Rosacoke to Heywood, her boyfriend. She says that they are leaving that afternoon in Heywood's small airplane. Later, when Rosacoke and her mother are looking at a picture of her father, who died thirteen years earlier, Baby

Sister bursts in and announces that the airplane just flew over with three people in it. Rosacoke assumes that Wesley has gone back to Norfolk without stopping to see her.

She takes her camera and goes to the house of Mildred's mother because she had promised to take a picture of Mildred's baby for her relatives. When she arrives, it is too late in the day and, therefore, too dark to take a picture. It is also too dark to walk home, so she decides to walk further on to the Beavers' house to phone her brother Milo for a ride. There she finds, to her surprise, Wesley standing on the front porch.

He is as evasive as ever when she asks about their relationship. As he is driving her home, they see some deer crossing the road and follow them into the woods to see if they will go to the watering hole. Wesley takes her to an open field that she was not aware of, and there they have sex. During the passion, Wesley says, "I thank you, Mae," which he does not remember saying afterward. Rosacoke immediately regrets having given in to his pressures, and wants to go home. After he goes back to Norfolk, they exchange a few letters. Rosacoke wants to know how he feels about her, but she tears up the letters that approach this subject.

One of her letters is a long, detailed account of how her sister-in-law, Sissie, went into labor, and of the disappointment at finding that the baby died during childbirth. Milo, the baby's father, becomes distant from Sissie and the rest of the family. Rosacoke vows to stay beside her brother and help him through his grief, but, when they pick up the mail in town, she finds a letter from Wesley asking her if "the coast is clear"—a way of asking whether she is pregnant. The question upsets her so much that she has Milo drop her off at home, unable to go on with him.

On December 15, Rosacoke writes a letter to Wesley saying that she is in fact pregnant but that she does not expect any action from him. She is willing to bear the responsibility for the baby by herself. Before sending the letter, she tears it up.

Chapter 3

The third section begins three days before Christmas. Rato, who is the brother of Milo, Rosacoke, and Baby Sister, comes home from the army, bringing presents. Rosacoke goes off to the house of Mr. Isaac, the dying rich man who owns much of the land in the area. A series of strokes have reduced him to being like an infant. His assistant, Sammy Ransom, has to feed him and clean him and prop him up in his chair, and the old man's only pleasure is sucking on candy. Wesley comes to Mr. Isaac's house to get Rosacoke and tell her that she has to be in the church pageant that her mother has planned, since Willie Duke has eloped and will not be available. Outside, she tells Wesley about her pregnancy, and he reluctantly offers to elope with her that night. Rosacoke rejects his offer.

In the Christmas pageant, Rosacoke plays Mary. She leans over the manger where a baby, Frederick Gupton, lies. During the performance, the baby seems poised to cry. Rosacoke's first reaction is to turn him over to his real father, Macey Gupton, who is

playing Joseph, but she realizes that it would look strange for the show. She picks the baby up and he gnaws at her breast until he is tired out. As different characters approach the manger scene, Rosacoke realizes that only one of them, Wesley Beavers, truly knows her, and she decides that she will, after all, marry him, and she whispers her decision to the sleeping baby, wishing him "a long and happy life."

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

A Long and Happy Life is the story of Rosacoke Mustian, a young woman searching for love and a purpose for her life in rural North Carolina of the early 1960's. As the story begins, Rosacoke is riding on the back of Wesley Beaver's motorcycle; she is on her way to the funeral of a childhood playmate, Mildred Sutton, who has died in childbirth. As it is the day of the Delight Baptist Church picnic, Rosacoke knows that she will be the only white person at the funeral.

Choosing not to accompany her inside, Wesley sits under a tree outside the church and polishes the dust off his motorcycle; Rosacoke wonders why, after six years of dating, Wesley cannot even commit to sitting with her through a one-hour service. When Wesley later roars off on the motorcycle in the middle of the funeral, Rosacoke is so embarrassed that she leaves early and begins the walk home without him.

Along the way, Rosacoke decides to cool off in Mr. Isaac's woods, where she can soothe her tired feet in the spring hidden deep in the trees. As she rests in the quiet coolness, she thinks about the times she and Mildred had played among these very trees and remembers the last time she had seen Mildred, the winter before. Trying to disguise her early pregnancy, Mildred had spoken to Rosacoke evasively, not lingering in the cold afternoon to risk questions that couldn't be answered.

Frightened by a noise behind her, Rosacoke hides behind a tree until she realizes that the intruder is Wesley Beaver trying to find Rosacoke so that he can take her to the church picnic. Preferring not to go in her sad frame of mind, Rosacoke tries to resist Wesley, but he perseveres, and the couple joins the rest of Rosacoke's family at the lake.

Rosacoke joins her mother, Emma; her brother, Milo and his pregnant wife, Sissie; and the baby of the family, Baby Sister. The only family member missing is Rato, who is serving in the Army. Rosacoke's annoyance with Wesley continues, as he flirts with other girls and shows off the diving techniques he had learned in the Navy. After everyone else leaves, Wesley tries to lure Rosacoke into the trees for an intimate encounter, but she resists on principle and because he has never declared love for her.

As far as Rosacoke is concerned, Wesley may return to Roanoke and the loose women he has grown accustomed to during his Navy service. To further fan the flames of her jealousy, Wesley admits that Willie Duke has asked for a ride to Roanoke, as she is moving there to work in a beauty parlor. Wesley's refusal to admit whether or not his future plans include Willie is the last insult for Rosacoke, and she demands to be taken home immediately; they ride the whole way in silence.

Three weeks later and softened by love, Rosacoke writes to Wesley telling him about the intense heat and how everyone in the house is trying to manage, especially Sissie, who is especially uncomfortable. She mentions that she is going to take some clothes to Mildred's baby and marvels at the fortitude of the little orphan. A giant post card is her only response from Wesley, and Rosacoke replies with another letter asking about his intentions for their relationship. Having dated for six years, Rosacoke hopes for more interest and commitment from Wesley but his brief reply is that maybe they can talk when he comes home the next time.

November arrives with no sight of Wesley. However, Willie Duke creates quite a stir in the town when she arrives home one day in the private plane of her new fiancé, who lands it in the middle of a pasture. Rosacoke's enthusiasm for this novelty clouds quickly enough when she discovers that Wesley has also arrived on that plane but has made no attempts to visit.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The search for love and fulfillment is a predominant theme in the story, with each of the characters approaching it in his or her own way. Rosacoke's dilemma is that she has spent six years with Wesley Beaver, but that he has not once declared his intentions to her and remains at a distance even when they are together. Now that she is twenty-one, Rosacoke looks for more commitment; Wesley, though, is still finding fulfillment with unnamed girls in Roanoke, where he now lives. The gap between Rosacoke's expectations and what Wesley is able to give provides the conflict that fuels Rosacoke's perspectives and actions throughout

The frustration of unfulfilled affection touches other characters in the story as well; Mildred experienced it, though her circumstances were different, and the experience eventually caused her death. Mildred's child will forever be affected as well, for he will never know the identity of his father. Rosacoke's mother bears the weight of a similar sadness, having been widowed and left with four children by a man whom she married out of convenience but never especially loved. Milo and Sissie seem to be the only ones whose love shows any promise, and the references to the imminent arrival of their first child offer a contrast to the situations of other characters.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The morning after Willie returns home by plane, Rosacoke attends church with her family; she gets her first look at Willie's fiancé, but finds that Wesley has not shown up for services. Disappointed that she is unable to confront Wesley and faced with the obvious humiliation that he hasn't come to call, Rosacoke hides away in her room after Sunday dinner.

In a tender moment, Mrs. Mustian tells Rosacoke about her own past mistakes. She had believed she could change Horatio, Rosacoke's father, after marriage, but soon found that things only got worse; now she is a widow with four children. The motherly advice should have been clear to Rosacoke: Wesley is not coming back, so it would be best if Rosacoke could set her mind on some other dream. The advice falls on deaf ears, though, and Rosacoke bundles up and sets off down the road with her camera, having promised Mildred's mother that she would take a picture of Mildred's baby so that far off relatives could see what he looks like.

Rosacoke stays with Mildred's family for a long time, and eventually realizes that it is too dark to continue home on foot. She decides that there is still enough daylight to get her to the Beaver household, however, and plans to walk there and then phone Milo to come get her. Wesley and his brother are on the porch as Rosacoke approaches and agree to interrupt their harmonica session so that Wesley can drive Rosacoke home.

The beginning of the ride home is filled with tension, but suddenly the two are diverted by a deer running across the road in front of them. It is Rosacoke's idea to park close by and wait to see the does that can't be far behind. The couple's time in the woods leads to an intimate encounter which Rosacoke hopes will bind Wesley to her-but in the heat of passion Wesley calls out another girl's name, and the spell is broken.

Wesley's letter to Rosacoke the following week invites her for Thanksgiving in Roanoke, where there will be parties with all of Wesley's friends; he also expresses hope that she is no longer angry with him. Rosacoke shelves her immediate curt reply for a few days and instead writes to him of the sad news that Sissie's baby had been born dead, and the family is consumed with grief; consequently, she will not be able to accept his Thanksgiving invitation.

During the weeks that follow the baby's death, Sissie is inconsolable, and Milo copes by disappearing, causing Mrs. Mustian to fear that he is falling into patterns of alcohol abuse, as her own husband had done. Eventually Milo resurfaces and gives all the new baby clothes to Mildred's orphaned boy; Rosacoke knows then that Milo is on his way to recovery.

Wesley's reply to Rosacoke's sad letter extends his condolences to the family and expresses regret that Rosacoke will not be coming to Roanoke for the Thanksgiving holiday. Almost as an afterthought, he asks if there have been any repercussions from their encounter in the woods a few weeks ago. Studying the signature as she does every time, Rosacoke sees that there is still no mention of love from Wesley Beaver.

Rosacoke takes a few long minutes to understand the meaning of Wesley's reference to "repercussions.".In all the grief surrounding the loss of Sissie's and Milo's baby, it had never occurred to her that she herself might be pregnant. Rosacoke determines that the best plan is to keep working and not arouse any suspicions, so she rises early for chores before her job as a telephone operator each day and then works until midnight every night doing more things around the house. Unfortunately, her tired body will still not rest, knowing that facts need to be faced and decisions made very soon. Rosacoke feels that the decisions might be easier if only she could have some indication of true love from Wesley instead of the vague messages in his letters.

Enough time finally passes to confirm Rosacoke's suspicion of pregnancy. Having spent all of a Sunday afternoon alone in her room, Rosacoke emerges to find that she is home alone with Sissie, the rest of the family having driven to town for Christmas pageant rehearsals. Given her current situation and Sissie's still volatile emotional condition, Rosacoke decides to take a walk; she wants a quiet atmosphere so that she can think about her future, which now includes a child.

Rosacoke stops near the pond at Mr. Issac's farm, losing track of the time, until the sight of an approaching light startles her. The carrier of the light turns out to be Sammy, Mr. Isaac's attendant, coming to determine what has disturbed the guineas. Sammy is another friend who used to play with Rosacoke and Mildred, and they are close despite their racial difference.

In an attempt to make conversation in an awkward moment, Sammy asks Rosacoke about her plans to marry Wesley. Unfortunately, there are no plans, and Sammy would have been shocked if he had known the entire story. According to Sammy, everyone in town thinks that Rosacoke surely has a hold on Wesley by now. Fortunately, Rosacoke is spared the embarrassment of having to reply when Mr. Isaac's sister, Miss Marina, steps out to check on the commotion.

Sammy surrenders his lantern to Rosacoke, who walks home and silently composes a letter to Wesley, informing him of her pregnancy but taking full responsibility and stating that she will not be surprised if he doesn't come around to see her over Christmas. Characteristically, Rosacoke writes the letter but sets it aside with the intention of reading it again in a few days to gauge its message.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Disappointment continues to cloud Rosacoke's vision of her situation with Wesley, but in a weakened moment, she agrees to an intimate encounter which she hopes will cement

their relationship. Unfortunately, Wesley's feelings do not match the intensity of Rosacoke's, and the conflict between expectations and delivery continues. Wesley's obtuse nature is also in conflict with Rosacoke's extreme sensitivity, but there is some force that continues to draw them together.

Rosacoke also struggles with the irony of facing an unexpected pregnancy at the same time that her brother and his wife have lost the child they had lovingly anticipated. The new baby will be a source of pain for many, and everyone will need to adapt.

The scene at the pond is also important, in that it offers a glimpse of another of Rosacoke's friendships. Rosacoke, Sammy, and Mildred had grown up together and remained friends as adults in spite of their racial differences, a situation that is especially noteworthy given that the novel was published in the early 1960's, when segregation was still in place in America's Southern states.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

A few days before Christmas, Milo goes to pick up Rato, who is coming home from Oklahoma for leave. Always a bit on the slow side, Rato has not changed in Rosacoke's eyes, and she wonders why she had thought an army uniform might have made him into something tough and unapproachable. Rato's innate sweetness is still intact, and even though it is still a few days until Christmas, his insistence on distributing his gifts early shows Rosacoke that her brother is still very childlike. Perhaps Rosacoke had thought Rato could be a confidant for her, but all hope of that quickly vanishes.

While the rest of the family heads to church for the Christmas pageant, Rosacoke remains at home under the guise of keeping company with Sissie, who is still in mourning. Her restless mind won't let her stay still very long, though, so Rosacoke ventures next door to deliver some Christmas candy to Mr. Isaacs. Very old and in poor health, Mr. Isaacs has always held a special place in the hearts of the Mustians because of his kindness to them after Mrs. Mustian had been widowed.

Sammy lets Rosacoke into the Isaac home and cautions her that the old man's memory is failing and that he may not remember who she is. Rosacoke is anxious for any company to take her mind off her troubles and ventures into Mr. Isaac's bedroom for a visit. Just as Sammy had predicted, Mr. Isaac's face shows no sign that he recognizes Rosacoke, but he is grateful for the candy.

Suddenly, there is a commotion in the front room, and Wesley barges into the bedroom to get Rosacoke, who is needed at the church immediately. Willie Duke, who had signed up to play the part of the Virgin Mary in the pageant, has eloped, and Rosacoke is the only other woman who knows how to play the part. Rosacoke reluctantly agrees to go and is thankful for the time to discuss her pregnancy with Wesley; his solution is that the two of them drive to South Carolina that night and get married. Still unsure that this is the proper solution, Rosacoke doesn't answer and is relieved when their arrival at the church allows her to escape Wesley's scrutiny.

Taking her place as the Virgin Mary beside the manger, Rosacoke's mind wanders to the life she might have with Wesley in Roanoke; at the moment, it does not seem to be a viable option. The responsibility for this child is hers, and she is on the point of deciding that she will bear it without the added burden of a man who does not love her passionately. As the pageant progresses, however, Rosacoke is distracted by the baby in the manger; his crying reaches a point where it can no longer be ignored, so Rosacoke picks him up and thinks about the child she carries. When Rosacoke's eyes meet Wesley's in the crowded church, she suddenly sees the relationship between them in a new, more promising light; she knows what her answer will be then and looks again at the now sleeping baby who surely knows the meaning of love.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The life-death-life cycle is used thematically to portray the natural progression of time in this story of hopes and disappointments. One mother dies in childbirth, another child is stillborn, and now Rosacoke carries a child of her own. The author points out that nothing is static in life; relationships change for good or bad, and growth is an outcome whether or not the participants are prepared. It is primarily Rosacoke's evolution that is revealed in the story, and she stands out in contrast to many of those who surround her. Maturity and a strong sense of self make Rosacoke better equipped to achieve a long and happy life than most of the other characters, who seem doomed to mediocrity. The tension of Rosacoke's struggle against being average seems out of place in the bucolic region in which she lives, but the author's tactic of allowing the reader into Rosacoke's mind makes the struggle believable and makes it possible to believe that Rosacoke's ways of approaching challenge and conflict will allow her to achieve her heart's desires.

Characters

Landon Allgood

Landon is a helpless man who is addicted to paregoric, a tincture of opium. He has no toes because once, long ago, he fell asleep in a road one Christmas and they fell off. On the day of Mildred's funeral, he is found sleeping in the church. On the day of the Christmas pageant, Rosacoke finds him stealing decorations from the church, which he explains are for his sister, Mary, who is Mildred's mother and is raising her baby, Sledge. Mary promised to give him a hot meal if he would bring her Christmas greens. Landon's name is brought up during the Christmas pageant when Rosacoke smells paregoric on the breath of the baby, Frederick, and realizes that it is being used to keep him narcotized.

Mr. Isaac Alston

"Mr. Isaac," as he is called, is the rich landowner whom the people in Rosacoke's life look up to. The forest around them is referred to as "Mr. Isaac's forest," implying that nature belongs to him, making him godlike. He is eighty-two years old and has lost most of his mental faculties due to a series of strokes. His one interest in life is horehound candy. The people in the county look to Mr. Isaac as a trusted benefactor: for instance, when Rosacoke's father died, Mr. Isaac came to the house and gave her mother fifty dollars. As a measure of their esteem, they all pitch in together to buy him a new wheelchair, even though Sammy, who takes care of Mr. Isaac, tells them that he probably would not appreciate the gesture because he is so mentally unaware.

Willie Duke Aycock

A local beauty pageant winner—she won a Dairy Queen Contest the previous summer—Willie Duke has had a crush on Wesley Beavers for a long time. She goes to Norfolk when he does because she has a job curling hair, causing Rosacoke to assume that they are having an affair until she comes home a little later with a new boyfriend, Heywood Betts. Soon after, she and Heywood go to Florida to be married.

Wesley Beavers

Wesley is the boyfriend of the novel's protagonist, Rosacoke Mustian. They have been dating for about six years. At the start of the novel, Wesley is back home just briefly, having spent three years in the Navy, stationed at Norfolk, Virginia, fixing radios. He is leaving soon to return to Nor-folk to work in a motorcycle dealership. He drives Rosacoke to a funeral on his motorcycle, then stays outside, gunning the cycle's engine, tuning it and polishing it, oblivious to the distraction that he is causing to the ceremony. When he takes Rosacoke to a church picnic, he and her brother Milo joke about sex,

and he flirts with another girl, Willie Duke Aycock. He later teases Rosacoke with the fact that Willie Duke is going to Norfolk at the same time that he is, implying that they might have an affair. Wesley tries hard to convince Rosacoke to have sex with him, mostly by hinting flirtatiously about other women with whom he has been involved, but she holds out.

After they finally do have sex one night, Wesley returns to Norfolk. He is distant and cheerful when he writes, signing his one letter "Your friend, Wesley" and asking her if "the coast is clear" (his playful way of asking if she has become pregnant). When he finds out that she has in fact become pregnant, he stalls, asking why she took so long to tell him and whether she has had any other lovers, before he asks her to run off to South Carolina with him and be married that night.

Heywood Betts

Heywood is a pilot who owns his own airplane ("scrap metal is my work," he tells Rosacoke, "flying's just a hobby"). He comes home with Willie Duke Aycock in November, after she has been away to Norfolk for a few weeks. By Christmas, they are engaged.

Macey Gupton

Macey is the father of four children. When Sissie Mustian is in labor, Macey offers to help out, using his extensive experience in childbirth. As a result, he is there when the doctor pronounces the baby dead. Later, Mama Mustian wants to call him to find Milo, who has run away in his grief, and Rosacoke tells her, "Don't call in the Guptons for any more Mustian business." During the Christmas pageant at the end of the book, Macey plays Joseph, standing by while Rosacoke, as Mary, takes care of his eight-month-old son playing the infant Jesus.

Marise Gupton

The sister of Willie Duke Aycock and wife of Macey Gupton, she has had four children already and, by the end of the novel, is pregnant with the fifth.

Baby Sister Mustian

Baby Sister is thirteen years old. Her father committed suicide before she was born. She occupies herself playing with dolls, pretending to be a mother to them, and leading the smaller children in games.

Emma Mustian

"Mama" is the mother of Milo, Rosacoke, Rato, and Baby Sister. She serves as a reminder of love in vain: for thirteen years, she lived with their father, who was a terrible drunk and an abusive husband. When Rosacoke is upset about Wesley's leaving, Mama brings her a picture of her father, one of the very few fond reminders she has of him. At the end of the book, Rosacoke feels required to participate in the Christmas pageant because Mama is the one who organized it.

Milo Mustian

Milo is Rosacoke's brother. He is married to Sissie, and throughout the first half of the book, while she is pregnant with their first child, he makes jokes about women "catching" men with sex. Later, when the baby dies during childbirth, Milo is so distraught that he will not even talk to Sissie. Rosacoke promises to stay with him and give him someone to share his grief with, but a letter from Wesley upsets her and she has to abandon him. He takes all of the baby clothes they bought and gives them to Mildred Sutton's mother, who is raising Mildred's baby. Milo later returns home and resumes a strained relationship with his wife.

Rato Mustian

Horatio "Rato" Mustian is Rosacoke's brother, named after their father. For most of the novel, he is away in the army. He returns at Christmas with presents, including one for Milo and Sissie's baby, not knowing that it died.

Rosacoke Mustian

Rosacoke is the main character in the novel. She was born in 1937 and is about twenty-one years old at the time the novel takes place. She is a serious woman who is not sure whether the great love of her life is in fact true love or if her mind is just grasping at some potential for excitement and escape from small community life.

Rosacoke lives with her family in a small house in rural North Carolina, where they have lived all of their lives. At the start of the book, she and Wesley Beavers have dated for six years and are so close that people around town assume that they are going to be married someday. She is constantly irritated with Wesley because he flirts with other women and jokes about all of the girlfriends he has had. When he tries to have sex with her before leaving to take a job in another town, she turns him down. In the letters that she exchanges with him after that, she asks Wesley if he loves her, and he writes back about superficial matters.

After Wesley has come back to town she does give in and has sex with him. She regrets it immediately when he calls her by another woman's name during intercourse.

Rosacoke finds that she is pregnant and resolves to keep the news to herself, to keep Wesley from feeling a sense of responsibility, just as Mildred Sutton, who died during childbirth, never revealed the name of her child's father. She changes her mind, though, after visiting Mr. Isaac, an old man who is, mind and body, like a child. She tells Wesley about the baby, and he somewhat reluctantly agrees to marry her, but she refuses his offer until, during the annual Christmas pageant, Rosacoke (playing the Virgin Mary) comes to understand the baby that is representing the infant Jesus. She decides to marry for her child's sake, despite her own prospect for unhappiness.

Sissie Mustian

At the beginning of the novel, Milo's wife Sissie is pregnant with their first child, and she feels sick in the July heat. Later, when the baby dies during childbirth, she becomes severely depressed."Mr. Isaac's Sammy." The rumor that Milo spreads, and that Rosacoke is convinced of later on, is that Sammy is the father of Mildred Sutton's child.

Mildred Sutton

This novel begins with Mildred's funeral. She was a childhood playmate of the Mustians. Seeing Mildred when she was pregnant gave Rosacoke the feeling that Mildred had somehow become wiser than she. Mildred died soon after her twenty-first birthday, giving birth to her son, Sledge, without telling anyone who the child's father was. One of Rosacoke's clearest childhood memories is of finding a clearing deep in Mr. Isaac's woods with Mildred and several other children. A deer suddenly appeared, causing Mildred to blurt out, "Great God Amighty!"

Themes

Love

Central to Rosacoke Mustian's dilemma in this book is the question of whether Wesley Beavers truly loves her. On one hand, his focus when he is home is on her. He escorts her to picnics and drives her places that she needs to go, such as Mildred's funeral. People kid him about when they are going to be married, and late in the book Sammy Ransom says that he just assumed that they already had plans. Despite their social situation, though, Wesley is distant to Rosacoke in private. He hints at relations with other girls, teasing her with talk of skinny-dipping and dancing with them. (Rosacoke eventually finds out that his hints are probably real when he blurts out another girl's name during sex.) He does not tell her when he is coming to town or when he is going. He has never asked for a picture of her, and the only one he has is one that she insisted he take. He writes seldom, and only about inconsequential things. When she asks in a letter, "are we in love?" he responds, "You are getting out of my depth now."

At the same time, Rosacoke is not sure whether what she feels for Wesley is love or not. She has been compelled by him since their first meeting six years earlier, but she does not know why. At one point she thinks of the things that she has kept from their relationship, letters and mementos, as being no more to her than the reminders of her dead father. The book can be read in terms of Rosacoke's exploration of other relationships—Milo and Sissie, Macey and Marise, Mildred and Sammy, her parents, and even Willie Duke and Heywood Betts—in terms of what they can tell her about love. In the end, she decides to marry Wesley because "After all Wesley knows me," even though she says that it is the baby, not Wesley, who knows about love.

Identity

One of the reasons that Wesley is able to make Rosacoke accept his casual attitude toward their relationship is that she does not know who she is and what she can rightfully expect from life. He, on the other hand, is full of self-confidence. When she asks why he acts as he does, he responds, "Because I am Wesley." When she is upset with him, Rosacoke has one request of him: "Do me a favor. . . . Say *Rosacoke*." She needs Wesley to acknowledge her individuality.

She looks back to her childhood fondly as a time when life was full of adventure, when finding a new area of forest or seeing a deer unexpectedly could open up new possibilities. She is growing up, though, a fact that is highlighted in the novel by the contrast between Rosacoke, who is the kind of person willing to take responsibility for attending her friend's funeral, and Baby Sister, who, at thirteen, is lost in a fantasy life with her dolls.

But the onset of adulthood is not appealing to her as she looks at the models of adult behavior around her. No one has the sane, kind, and respectful life that Rosacoke wishes for herself. When she finds herself pregnant, she realizes that all of the people around her spend their lives serving their babies or, in the case of Sammy and Mr. Isaac, serving an old man who has reverted to infancy. Her mother, for instance, has nothing good to say about devoting her life to a drunken and abusive man. Macey and Marise Gupton's lives are overrun with the children they keep producing. Mildred loses her life to childbirth. Milo and Sissie are devastated by the loss of their child. Rosacoke resists all assumptions that she and Wesley will become just another rural couple, that she will be just another of his sexual conquests and then just another young mother. Cradling the infant Frederick in her arms, he reaches out to her as he would to his mother, and she rejects the mother role, telling him, "Frederick, I ain't who you think I am."

In the end, though, Rosacoke does assume the identity of wife and mother. Her one thin hope of identity is hung on Wesley, on the fact that "he knows me," even though he has already shown little ability or willingness to distinguish her from the rest of his women.

It is of no small importance that *A Long and Happy Life* begins with the funeral of Mildred Sutton, who has died while giving birth to a baby. Mildred represents the camaraderie of Rosacoke's childhood and the mystery of approaching adulthood: having run into her once when she was pregnant, she reflects on how "Mildred knew things that Rosacoke didn't know." Her initiation into adulthood kills Mildred, and throughout the book there are other episodes of birth that are just as significant.

Baby Sister's situation reflects Mildred's. The Mustians' father died after his wife, Mama, was pregnant for the fourth time but before Baby Sister's birth. Being born of just one parent makes Baby Sister infantile herself, for she occupies herself with games and dolls, oblivious to the world around her.

When Rosacoke's sister-in-law Sissie gives birth, it is the baby, not the parent, who dies. The parents are left in despair, their relationship with each other damaged, probably forever.

Finally, there is the situation of Mr. Isaac Alston. Having once been a powerful man in the county, he is regressing toward the womb. Mr. Isaac is in his eighties and expects to live to ninety like all the men of his family. Due to a series of strokes, he is unable to dress himself, comb his own hair, or sit up by himself, and he needs an assistant to do these things for him in the same way that a baby needs its mother. His one joy in life, the only thing that he constantly recognizes, is candy. Rosacoke's visit to his house late in the book reminds her of his wealth and generosity when he was a younger man and that idea of human potential overcoming human frailty is one of the key factors in her resolve to do what she can for the baby she is carrying.

Style

Point of View

A Long and Happy Life is told from a third-person limited point of view. It is third person because the narration refers to all characters as "he" or "she," as opposed to "I" or "you." It is limited because almost all the action described is seen from Rosacoke Mustian's perspective. Events are relayed as Rosacoke remembers or experiences them. Once in a while, the narrative breaks this pattern and gives readers the thoughts of other characters, such as when, after Wesley has sex with Rosacoke in a field, his thoughts are given: "Not knowing whether she would wait or walk on home, Wesley took his time." Instances of points of view other than that of Rosacoke are extremely rare in this book.

Setting

Setting is usually important to novels, but it is especially crucial to this one. The rural North Carolina that Price presents to his readers in this and in other books is a quiet place where people lack the distractions of the modern electronic age and are, therefore, more focused on the lives of the people around them. Births and deaths are the high points of their lives; jobs and education have little to do with them. An airplane coming to town is big news, and people stand out on their porches to see its arrival or departure. When Wesley leaves North Carolina for Virginia, the distance is so considerably far that Rosacoke can only send off letters and hope that he might respond; when he suggests that they elope to Florida, it is like suggesting a trip to another country.

This situation results in making the lives of all the characters intertwine, so that the Mustians know all about the Guptons and the Ransoms and the Suttons and the Allgoods. It is also, however, a major source of Rosacoke's discontent, as she struggles against the role of motherhood that all young women in her little world are expected to adopt.

Historical Context

Contemporary readers might be surprised to find the casual friendships between blacks and whites portrayed in this novel. Throughout much of American history, races were segregated in the southern states, including North Carolina, where this novel takes place. Most histories of that region in the 1960s tend to focus on the growing violence between blacks and whites as the Civil Rights movement heated up.

Segregation followed from the end of slavery in 1865 and was made into law when the Supreme Court, in 1896, declared that it would not be unconstitutional to treat blacks and whites differently as long as both sides were offered "separate but equal" accommodations. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, many southern states adhered to that policy in theory, although the railroad cars, hotels, housing, etc. that were assigned to blacks were clearly worse than those allowed whites. This situation could not be changed democratically because laws were passed to keep blacks from voting, blocking their way with requirements about land ownership and I.Q. tests that were usually given selectively, excluding uneducated blacks but not uneducated whites.

After World War II, the Civil Rights movement took hold in this country. Black Americans who had been treated as equals in Europe were not content to be treated as second-class citizens in the country they had fought to defend. The 1950s brought a fierce conflict against segregation in the South. In 1954, the Supreme Court struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine in schools, ordering them to find a way to let black students attend the same schools that white students attended. In 1955, Rosa Parks made a significant statement against segregated transportation by refusing to move from the "whites only" section of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. As the courts found more and more segregationist practices to be illegal, white supremacists became increasingly violent against blacks who crossed the racial lines. Over two hundred black homes and churches in the South were bombed between 1947 and 1965. Governors of southern states, such as George Wallace of Alabama and Ross Barnett of Mississippi, supported their white constituents' desire to keep the racial status quo, even if it meant violence; federal troops were called in when local or state agencies could not be trusted to protect black citizens.

raising public concern across the country. As a result, a new generation of northern black activists arose, espousing militant slogans and, in some cases, phrasing the fight for civil rights as a war between blacks and the United States government.

Today, the racial situation in the South in the 1960s is remembered for news coverage of violence. The novel's depiction captures a truer image of day-to-day race relations: blacks clearly held a disadvantage, but they also socialized with their white neighbors, albeit in a guarded fashion.

Critical Overview

By the early 1960s, white students from northern colleges had been mobilized by southern civil rights groups, such as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to help with desegregation. The presence of liberal-minded whites at voter registration drives and sit-ins against businesses that refused to serve blacks gave the Civil Rights movement more public attention than it had before. More media outlets started covering violent demonstrations during this period,

From its first publication, *A Long and Happy Life* has been recognized as the start of a major literary career, showing a promise of talent that Reynolds Price has continued to make good on to this day. Robert Drake, writing in the *Southern Review*, noted that the book "stood out like a beacon of light, or, at the least, a breath of fresh air" among other works of the time that were more programmatic or that relied on sexuality to be interesting. Noted literary critic Granville Hicks told readers, "I have seldom read a first novel that had such sustained lyric power as Reynolds Price's *A Long and Happy Life*: not pretty, pseudo-poetic prose but a vigorous, joyful outburst of song."

As Price's career progressed, his works were well-received, but critics continually return to his first novel as being, if not his best, then among his best. Theodore Solotaroff began a 1970 review of Price's career by observing that "Eight years ago Reynolds Price, then twenty-nine years old, published a first novel . . . which immediately established him as the legitimate heir of the great southern writers of the past generations." He went on to characterize the writer's career up to that point as "complex," with novels and plays of varying quality, though always interesting.

The characters in *A Long and Happy Life* were continued by Price in two more novels and a play, none of which impressed critics as much as the original novel.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at two colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly shows an appreciation for Price's skill at raising references and insinuations in A Long and Happy Life *that never need to be explained.*

There are many reasons to recommend Reynolds Price's 1962 debut novel, *A Long and Happy Life*, and most of them have to do with the way that Price makes his characters and their situation real and convincing. The world that surrounds the book's protagonist, Rosacoke Mustian, is vivid, rich, and varied, so much so that, as in the real world, there are issues and actions that can never be fully understood. It starts with a mystery—who is the father of Mildred Sutton's baby?—and continues to drop one open-ended suggestion after another. Who is the younger boy in the photo of Rosacoke's father, and what is he shouting? What happens between Milo, Wesley, and Willie Duke beneath the surface of Mason's Lake, that the men would carry her back to the shore "like a sack of dry meal" and then would race back to swim the whole lake twice? Where does Rosacoke work? Like life, the novel offers glimpses of things that an observer might hope to find out more about but that, as often or not, are left to sheer guesswork.

This effect is, of course, achieved by omission. Price raises issues, implies things, that he never follows through on. The credit he deserves is due to how difficult a feat this is. There is a constant struggle in any piece of fiction between the writer's attempt to imitate the world's unevenness and the possibility that a work that does in fact look too "real" will come out looking like a sloppy piece of writing. Handled well, as it is in *A Long and Happy Life*, the technique of leaving questions unanswered will leave readers with a sense of wonder. When handled poorly, as it is in the overwhelming majority of fiction that consciously tries to arouse curiosity, readers end up not feeling challenged or curious but only that the writer has done a poor job of proofreading the novel for continuity. That the right balance is achieved in this novel is commendable, especially in light of the fact that it is the writer's first novel. Readers do not feel impatient about what they do not know, and they tend to have confidence that everything will have some relevance in the end.

Not all of the unresolved issues are of the same level of importance, of course. Some have answers that can be reasonably inferred by readers who are willing to take the time to think about the context for a moment. For instance, the actions beneath the lake's surface already questioned here will fall into that category, as readers can guess, even without the specifics, that they are something fairly sexual. Other questions, such as Rosacoke's job, may be curious, but they really do not have to be answered, even after Price has teased his audience by having Rosacoke's mysterious, unnamed boss beg her to hurry back after she calls in sick. Another writer might be kind to his audience in such a case and satisfy their curiosity, but Price is secure enough to not feel pressured into giving information that is really not necessary for the story to go on. Still other mysteries, like the truth of the situation in the picture from 1915, seem central to the question of who the Mustians are. For the book to raise crucial issues like this and then abandon them might approximate the way that such unfinished pieces of

information present themselves in real life, but they are nonetheless maddening to readers who are, after all, on a search for the deepest corners of their protagonist's identity.

Perhaps the finest example of information that Price withholds from his readers, which another writer would spell out for them, is the question of what, exactly, might be in the poem that Rosacoke once wrote for the "What I Am Seeking in an Ideal Mate" contest. The book mentions this poem only once, with the explanation that it was "never sent in as it got out of hand." The possible contents of this poem are intriguing, and they represent the balance that the novel strikes consistently. On one hand, readers would find it to be terrifically helpful to have Rosacoke's romantic ideal spelled out for them, given that the main focus of the entire book is her effort to match the flawed reality of Wesley Beavers to the image in her mind of what he ought to be. Her poem would say a lot about why she is discontent throughout the whole story. On the other hand, though, is it really necessary to have Rosacoke's ideal mate spelled out? She is a uniquely gifted and sensitive character on most matters, but there are plenty of good reasons to assume that her idea of love is not particularly unique. The fact that she even thought about entering such a poetry competition implies in itself that what she thinks of as proper "mate" material probably covers the sort of ideas that are ordinary for a small-town girl who has more experience in preparing for love than she actually has in love. Her requirements for such a mate undoubtedly include caring, friendliness, devotion, romantic thinking, etc.—in short, all of the characteristics that Wesley does not have. Price is shrewd to realize that the importance of Rosacoke's poem lies not in the items she names but in the sheer number of them, indicating just how many desires she has that have gone unfulfilled. Leaving the poem out of *A Long and Happy Life* might give readers a vague sense of dissatisfaction, as if an unfulfilled promise has been made, but in that way it serves to make them feel the discontentment Rosacoke must feel.

The story treats things having to do with the body as the greatest mysteries of all: Mildred dies during birth, and Sissie's baby does not make it through the birthing process. These facts would not have been all that unusual for a small country town some forty years ago, but it is interesting that the narrative asks no questions about what happened in either case. Each death is accepted as just the sort of thing that can happen. Even the pregnancy which results from Rosacoke's first and only sexual encounter is compared to the miraculous virgin birth of the Bible when she is dressed up like the Virgin Mary in the Christmas pageant and given a child to hold. The cause of her pregnancy is clear enough, but Rosacoke still carries the attitude of a virgin, accepting the consequences of sex without ever directly accepting the fact that she has experienced it. Price never explains her decision to give in to Wesley's pressures for sex, only that it comes just after she realizes that Wesley will never change his ways. In effect, her pregnancy is treated as a natural and unavoidable event once she gives in and decides to not fight against the mysteries of the world.

This is the hidden dynamic that remains for readers to consider without being told by the author what they should think. Rosacoke's expectations from love are unstated but easily assumed; what Wesley expects of love can never be understood, and the novel ends when Rosacoke quits trying. The difficult thing, for both Rosacoke and the readers,

comes from trying to determine how much his evasions are done on purpose and how much they are done because evasion is just his nature. His method of flirting with her is to make her jealous by insinuating events that he refuses to tell her about. In one case, he brings up the idea of "skinny dipping" but not who he swam naked with. (She can tell that he is not just pretending to be worldly, though, by the lack of tan lines around his bathing suit.) During sex, he calls her by the name "Mae" but offers no explanation. Caught in a lie when he tells her that he has been ill from the air flight and has not been out since his arrival, when Rosacoke has already spoken with someone who saw him out the night before, he "tightened his lips, not as if he had made a joke but as if he had ridden that track as far as he intended and wouldn't she like to throw the switch?" Rosacoke accepts what she does not know about Wesley's life when she comes to the realization that it does not matter whether he is intentionally misleading her or is telling the truth to the best of his limited ability: either way, he is what he is.

In this sense, *A Long and Happy Life* is itself like Wesley Beavers, teasing its readers with its secrets, drawing their curiosity, and, ultimately, making them live comfortably with the fact that some things will always remain mysteries. It is a rare author who can make readers take a book on its own terms, but Price shows himself with this novel to know his characters and their environment well enough that there is never a question that unanswered questions are anything but intentional. In his first novel, he achieved one of the most difficult tasks a fiction writer can attempt: making readers feel comfortable with what they do not understand.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *A Long and Happy Life*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Schafer and Thompson give an overview of Price's career and writings.

Reynolds Price has moved from detailed examination of North Carolina rural life to an intense concern with the artist's vision of reality. Beginning with the tragicomic saga of the Mustian family (the novels *A Long and Happy Life* and *A Generous Man*, and the story "A Chain of Love," now collected in *Mustian*), he has come in *Love and Work* and *Permanent Errors* to wrestle with narrative forms closer to the bone. In the preface to *Permanent Errors* Price described his work as "the attempt to isolate in a number of lives the central error of act, will, understanding which, once made, has been permanent, incurable, but whose diagnosis and palliation are the hopes of continuance."

This applies to all Price's fiction. *A Long and Happy Life* is the inside story of Rosacoke Mustian, a country girl seeking a conventional life with an unconventional young man, Wesley Beavers. Her error is that she conceives "a long and happy life" only in the clichéd terms of romance, of settled-wedded-bliss tradition. She reviews her life, her family's life, is discontent, becomes pregnant by Wesley and finally comes to see him and herself in larger terms, terms of myth, in a Christmas pageant which shows her the complete (and divine) meanings of motherhood, birth, and love.

Myth becomes the vehicle of self-understanding more overtly in *A Generous Man*, which shows the Mustian family several years earlier. It describes an allegorical search for an escaped circus python, a giant serpent named Death, and the discovery of a lost treasure. Milo Mustian describes the stifling forces of convention which circumscribe their lives: "it's what nine-tenths of the humans born since God said 'Adam!' have thought was a life, planned out for themselves—all my people, my Mama, my Daddy (it was what strangled him), Rosacoke. . . ." Only by transcending the everyday, by seeing human life in larger terms, can the individual escape the slow strangulation of "permanent errors" and find direction and meaning in existence.

Good Hearts updates and completes the saga of Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers, who have reached married middle age and the wisdom of accumulated domestic experience. Wesley, after 28 years of marriage to Rosacoke, suddenly leaves home. Both Wesley and Rosacoke learn about their unique needs and natures, especially their sexual temperaments, in this separation. By the end of the story they are reunited after realizing essential truths about the evolving physical and spiritual demands of love.

Price's fiction has become increasingly abstract and complex as he has moved to a more inward vision. From the first he has used sets of images and metaphors to suggest a mysterious or magical reality beyond his pastoral settings. He has deepened this metaphorical (and psychological) interest in *Love and Work* and *Permanent Errors*, where the protagonists are no longer the eccentric pastoral figures of the Mustian clan but are closer to Price's own viewpoint. Price's fiction has always dealt with confusion of

the heart and alienation of the mind, but the recent work draws its images and symbols from Price's own experience—his family, a visit to Dachau prison camp, the writer's situation. The grotesqueness and unfamiliarity of the Mustian clan are replaced by more familiar and universal facts of contemporary life.

In *The Tongues of Angels*, Price creates a memoir-like *bildungsroman,* a story of adolescent initiation and adult epiphany, set in a Smoky Mountain summer camp. The novel explores directly the spiritual springs of art and the religious meaning of experience as an artist renders it. This is Price's most overt and effective disquisition on profound religious experience and memory as the basis of art.

In two large novels, *The Surface of the Earth* and *The Source of Light*, Price is most ambitious. The narratives deal with a family saga encompassing the first half of our century and drawing from Price's own experience. The novels detail through letters, conversations, and lyrical soliloquies the Mayfield family and its cycle of birth, maturity and death as viewed by Rob Mayfield, who focuses the narratives. The family is more genteel than the Mustians, and these novels detail a world of important things and social valences. The search by Rob Mayfield for a sense of himself and for a peaceful reconciliation with his father's memory is an important mirror image of Rosacoke Mustian's growth into adulthood.

Love and death are polarities in Price's work—how to save life from death, how to prevent life from becoming deathly, stale, void of myth and magic. The theme appears most clearly in *A Generous Man*, when the Mustians set out to find and kill Death, the great serpent, and are finally told, "Death is dead." In the course of this magical hunt, Milo Mustian comes to understand what he must do to save himself from the slow death of a clichéd life; Rato Mustian, the wise fool, grapples with Death and escapes its coils through his cunning folly; Rosacoke moves from complete innocence to the dawn of maturity. In his later fiction Price has moved from symbols of external life to more internalized ones: sleep, dreams, a writer seeking a relationship between love and work, self and others, private life and shared life. Price's fiction describes the individual's perceptions of himself and of the realities around him, the uses of imagination. His characters travel on a quest for the potency of myth and the ability to transcend a closed vision of everyday reality. They move toward permanent truths through "permanent errors."

Blue Calhoun is, in essence, another story of permanent errors, the novel being an extended letter written by Blue to his granddaughter through which he hopes for penance. Blue has seen his life crumble: a relapsing alcoholic, his decline begins with an affair with sixteen-year-old Luna. For Blue, these errors move inexorably to tragedies for which he feels responsible, including the death of his wife and his daughter by cancer. The feeling of guilt pervades Price's work, as does the desire for absolution, and both center on the interweaving of death and love.

Any understanding of love in Price's work is necessarily connected to grief, loss, and death, so that in *The Promise of Rest*, just as in *Blue Calhoun*, Price draws to the center of his work a man whose life of errors works to uncover the truths offered by love even

in the shadow of death. While *The Promise of Rest* details the final days of Wade Mayfield, the novel is more the unburdening of Wade's father Hutch and parallels Blue's unburdening of his past to his granddaughter. Hutch's mission to rescue Wade from isolation as he dies of AIDS is more a mission to revisit his own bisexual past and to understand the crumbling of his marriage and his disavowal of his African-American relationships.

Wade's gay relationship with an African American causes, literally and metaphorically, Hutch to reconnect with his past, with his errors, and to reconcile them with the fact of the death of his son. Hutch's various loves are at the center of the work, and each of those loves ends in a death: Hutch fails to reunite with Straw, his African-American friend with whom he had a gay relationship; Hutch's marriage to Ann ends in divorce; Wade, Hutch's only child, dies of AIDS. Each of these deaths are explorations of the love that once gave them life, of the relationships Hutch nurtured with different people in his life.

In *Roxanna Slade*, Price returns to a female narrative voice for the first time since *Kate Vaiden*, but the story, which reads variously as advice manual and extended elegy, parallels *Blue Calhoun*'s life narrative of love and death and the awful connections forged in the dark corners of the South. Indeed, Roxanna's life as told in the book literally begins with the death of Larkin Slade. Roxanna marries Larkin's brother, Palmer, and the two have a child, who is named after Larkin. The novel, told in the rambling, but forceful, narrative voice of Roxanna Slade, centers upon the complex relationships between black and white, male and female, and how those relationships affect others around them.

Palmer's illegitimate daughter, born by a poor African-American woman, becomes in almost Dickensian fashion the helpmate of Roxanna, and through the connections, Roxanna's life is laid bare. The narrative of Roxanna is self-consciously concerned with "telling it straight," and in large part, that purpose undergirds Price's work as a whole. While by no means a realist, Price uncovers the complexity that governs relationships and how love and death compete in a structuring reality. Price's works increasingly focus on the intensity of the relationships that govern lives, and how those relationships essentially change the realities of the world.

Source: William J. Schafer and Roger Thompson, "Price, (Edward) Reynolds," in *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th ed., edited by Neil Schlager and Josh Lauer, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 817-19.

Critical Essay #3

In the following Contemporary Authors (CA) *interview, Ross presents an interview with Reynolds Price that was conducted by telephone on January 18, 1991.*

CA: You've had both the discipline and the good fortune to explore your world in several forms: novels, short stories, poetry, essays, memoir, plays. Is there something to say, starting out, about the benefits and maybe the difficulties of examining your material in these different ways?

Price: Apart from the normal difficulties of trying to do anything well, I don't think any particular form or genre has presented more difficult problems than another. Obviously the novel requires much the most sustained application of energy. Certainly in the beginning of my career I found it considerably easier to write shorter things—poems, essays, short stories. But I think the longer I've continued to write the novel, the more I have felt that it has gone from being a difficult kind of application to being a job that has the joys of steady work that I feel good about.

I've enjoyed working in the different forms. One of the real problems in having a "literary career" is that, if you go on doing it for as long as I have, which is since I was twenty-one years old, part of what you're trying to do is keep yourself interested. And even more important than that, you're keeping yourself alert. You're trying continually to discover ways to clean your spectacles so that you can go on watching the world with a depth and freshness that anyone past the age of thirty-vie knows are difficult to maintain.

CA: You might have become an artist, like the first-person narrator of your 1990 novel The Tongues of Angels, *but before you were out of high school you came to feel your painting skills were insufficient for a career, as you said in the 1989 memoir* Clear Pictures. *Do you think some part of your experience in painting and drawing has helped you as a writer?*

Price: I think it has, tremendously. I think it trained my powers of witness, if you will. I talked in *Clear Pictures* about the fact that both my parents were especially watchful people, my mother perhaps most of all. That may well have come from the fact that she was an orphan. both her parents had died when she was young, and she had to grow up in someone else's family. Though it was in fact the family of her loving sister, she was still a bit of an outsider, an outlaw, in her childhood. And I think outlaws and the excluded of the world do very much tend to be the keen watchers of the world. They'd better be. I think perhaps the years I spent drawing and painting intensified what was probably a kind of acquired bent from my mother.

CA: Do you still draw and paint?

Price: I have spasms of it. I haven't done anything now for several years. I might pick up an occasional pad and sketch, but nothing sustained. I had my first spinal surgery in

1984, and as a result of the surgery and the radiation I was unable to write for four or five months. During that period I did a tremendous amount of drawing. Once it all ended, after about a year, it became clear to me that part of what I was apparently doing was repeating the whole pattern of my beginning to be involved in writing, which was to start out with the painting and drawing and somehow let that segue into another form in mimesis, another form of portraying the visible world. What I'd been working on before the surgery was *Kate Vaiden*. Afterwards, the book broke down completely on me, and it was four or five months before I could get back to work on it. Painting turned out to be the bridge that got me across the ravine.

CA: Do you feel your illness changed the course of that book in any way?

Price: I suspect that it did. Strangely enough, I had literally written the last sentence of Part One of the three parts of the book the day that I went into the hospital. So I had come to a natural stopping point in the story. That was both good and difficult. The difficulty was in making a leap from Part One to Part Two. I think if I had stopped in the middle of a scene, I might have been able to pick it up immediately and write the answer that the other character gives to what had just been said. But I had to get her across the gap between Part One and Part Two, and I couldn't do it for a long time. Once I did start, the novel moved with tremendous rapidity for me. I think I must have recommenced around December of '84 or January of '85, and I had finished by June.

I don't think there can be any doubt that there were changes in the book that are attributable to the events that I had gone through in recent months, but because I never plan novels in fine detail I couldn't say how I might have veered off an original plan. I never had a detailed outline. I had only a general knowledge that Kate would discover her lost son at the end of the book and that we would leave the novel with the thought that she was trying to make contact, but we shouldn't' know what the nature of that contact would be. Otherwise the details invented themselves. So perhaps a detail such a Kate's discovering that she has cancer may well be directly a result of my own surgery. I certainly didn't feel driven to put in something about cancer because I'd just had it. But who knows? It very likely turned up for that reason.

CA: I was fascinated to read after I read the novel that your mother had been the inspiration for Kate.

Price: She was. Again, the events of the novel have almost no resemblance to the events of my mother's life. And Kate's a lot younger than my mother: My mother was born in 1905. But the atmosphere of Kate, of this person who's undergone an awful domestic tragedy early in her life, was the atmosphere of my mother's life. Her mother died when my mother was five, and her father died when she was fourteen.

CA: Like so many of your characters, Kate is someone the outsider might not take a second look at, the "ordinary" person whom you always show not to be ordinary.

Price: That's something I've consciously wanted to do from the beginning of my career. I think it's partly because I came from a family in which people were gentle and civilized

but not highly literate. Only one or two members of either side of my family ever attended the university. So all my life I've felt a desire to make those generally inarticulate people articulate in fiction.

CA: Many readers knew you first as the author of A Long and Happy Life, *which told the early story of Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers. Rosacoke has first surfaced, though, in a story you write in 1955, "A Chain of Love." Mustians appeared in other books and stories, and Rosa and Wesley reappeared in 1988 in* Good Hearts. *What kept you interested in the family over a span of more than thirty years?*

Price: It would be hard to say. As I said in the preface in the book called *Mustian*, which brings together the existing Mustian stories up to 1983, they started when I was a senior in college and had to produce a short story for a creative writing class. I came up then with this story about Rosacoke, which I talked a good deal about in that preface. I simply can't say why.

In the winter of 1964, after the very appalling weeks and months that surrounded the assassination of John Kennedy, I was trying to write the novel that ultimately became *The Surface of the Earth*, but it seemed too depressing and too difficult for me to focus on at such a low ebb in our national life. I suddenly found myself thinking about a kind of rural comedy, and the character of Rosacoke's brother Milo came to hand as the most available character to be the center of this story. *A Generous Man* fairly quickly built itself around the character of Milo, though of course it backdated him to his early teens, earlier than *A Long and Happy Life*.

If you had asked me about the Mustians a year after I finished *A Generous Man*, I probably would have said, I'm sure I'm through the with Mustians. But in the early '70s I thought maybe I should look at them again. I made some notes and then I thought, No, that's it; let's leave them alone. So I got down to about 1985 or 1986, right after I'd finished *Kate Vaiden*, and I thought I was going to write a novel in the male first person, a novel that, though it would have direct connection with the plot or the characters of *Kate Vaiden*, would be a sort of male companion to the female point of view in Kate. But I couldn't write it. I wasn't ready to happen in 1986. Then all of a sudden I found myself thinking about the possibility that Wesley was going to run away from home and leave Rosa alone and that a disaster would happen to her. The next thing I knew, I was writing what turned out to be *Good Hearts*. There's very little conscious planning in the way my books come to me. They just arrive, and I try to have the sense to get them down.

CA: Do you think Wesley and Rosa might come back?

Price: I'm not going to say no this time! But I have absolutely no plans or ideas for that. If they come back, they'll come knocking at the door in their own time.

CA: At one time you expressed strong feelings for The Surface of Earth *and* The Source of Light, *both of which failed to get widespread critical acceptance at the time they were published. Do you think those books will get another look from at least academic critics because of the publicity your more recent work has gotten?*

Price: They do get a lot of attention; I'm always being sent articles that people have written about them. I think it's impossible to calculate what further attention they'll get. As for how I feel about them, those books constitute a single long novel which comes in two parts, and those nearly thousand pages of fiction certainly constitute to this point the largest attempt that I've made. And large doesn't mean the greatest number of pages; it means the most sustained attempt to look at the most of human life, the largest piece of time and character. In that sense I have a special fondness for the books. But there's really nothing I've written that I'm ashamed of or wish I could make disappear. I certainly don't go back and reread my own work. Not that I think it's bad, but it's sort of like going back and looking at old photographs of one's self and thinking, Oh, look at my haircut!—which of course I thought was wonderful at the time. I'm not a narcissist about my own work, but I'm glad I wrote it all.

CA: The hypnosis therapy you undertook to help you control pain gave you the heightened memory of childhood experiences that was part of the impetus to write the memoir Clear Pictures. *Does that kind of recall continue to happen?*

Price: No, not in the same way. After I had that series of what I call hypnosis lessons at Duke Hospital, memory was coming back in a kind of tumble that was abnormal for me. I've always had what I thought was a good memory, but that was a fairly phenomenal adventure for just those few months. In fact, the first great rush of memory I got as a result of the hypnosis was the material that became *The Tongues of Angels*. It was a lot of memory about my working as a camp counselor in the mountains of North Carolina when I was twenty years old; that all started flooding back over me in great detail. Then I began to make notes for those memories; I thought, Someday I'll write a book based on that summer of mine in the mountains near Asheville. But memories about my family and the towns in which I grew up were tumbling in simultaneously. For whatever unknown reason, I began writing the family memories first. Once *Clear Pictures* was finished, I turned back and got out my notes about old Camp Sequoia and began working on what became *The Tongues of Angels*.

CA: That book was the second novel you'd written in the first-person voice, Kate Vaiden *having been the first. How did you make that choice in the two novels, and what significance might be attached to its coming late in the sequence of your work?*

Price: I had done an occasional short story in the first person, and in my second volume of stories, *Permanent Errors*, there was a novella in the male first person. I'm trying to finish a novel now which is also in the male first person, and it may be the result of this hope that I've had to write a companion novel to *Kate*. I think I was a bit allergic to the first person early in my career. I was always quoting to my students something that Hemingway had said, which was that anybody can write a novel in the first persons. I sort of know what he meant: If you have the normal novelist's gift for mimicry, you can just say, I am this person, and start talking as that person. In many ways that's easier than saying he or she did so-and-so. But why I've had this explosion of three first-person novels in recent years I couldn't say. I've enjoyed it tremendously, but I wouldn't hesitate to write a third-person novel tomorrow. In fact I have been writing a lot of short stories the last couple of years, and most of those are third-person stories.

CA: What accounts for the increase in short stories?

Price: For the first time in my life, I've made myself a member of my short-story class. I teach a senior graduate class in short-story writing, and this semester I'm teaching a long-story class. I've made myself a contributing member: I do the assignments when the students do, and that's resulted in my coming up with the first new batch of stories I"I've had since 1970, when my second volume of stories was published. I put my stories out on the table and urge the students to be as honest with the teacher as he is with them. Of course, they probably aren't quite as candid as they ought to be, but with a little encouragement, they dig in pretty well.

CA: The titles of your 1985 poetry collection, The Laws of Ice, *and your 1990 one,* The Use of Fire, *make me think of Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice." Would you talk about how those opposites figure in your titles and in the collections?*

Price: I haven't counted, but I think the majority of the poems in *The Laws of Ice* come after the cancer surgery I had in the summer of '84. The title poem is very much about the experience of being totally ambushed at a particular moment in one's life by an enemy so enormous that even if one survives, one is going to become a new person as a result of that encounter. The laws of ice are the laws of death and affliction to which we are all subject from the moment we're born. *The Use of Fire* contains a great many poems which are based in the second and third surgeries I had and the wonderful period of recovery I've had since the fall of '86, when the most recent surgery occurred. There's a kind of spaciousness and relaxation and a sort of serene retrospection in *The Use of Fire* which I don't feel in *The Laws of Ice* at all. There's literal fire and ice then—literal terror and great warmth.

CA: Being sensitive to the frustration and real damage book reviewers can cause writers, how do you approach doing reviews and criticism of other people's work?

Price: In the very beginning of my career, I wrote one or two snooty reviews of the "I could do better than this" sort. But I think I very quickly realized that just wasn't worth doing, that there were plenty of people out there who were ready to take care of the "beat 'em up in the alley" detail, and I decided that since my time and energy were limited anyway, I wasn't going to review books that I didn't already know I liked. Since then, whenever anyone has asked me to review a book, I've always said that I would look at it and give them a quick answer, but I wouldn't do it sight unseen because I don't feel any necessity to beat up on people's writing.

There was one book I reviewed years ago, a book of short stories for children that I profoundly felt should be kept out of the hands of children. They were stories very much about violence and sexual abuse, and it seemed to me that for the age group they were being aimed at, they were a very bad idea. But that's the only case I can think of that I've written a review saying, "Do not buy this book—or at least, do not give it to your child." Other than that I've reviewed books that I knew in principle I was going to like and that I wanted to praise. I think the whole premise of book reviewing is so unexamined. A mediocre novel is not at all likely to damage the world or to damage

anyone else's soul. At the very most it might set their pocketbook back fifteen or twenty dollars. I never have understood the passion that highly negative reviewers like to take in their line about movies and books. To be a profession reviewer seems very strange, in any case.

CA: You've taught for most of your adult life. What's made it worth the doing?

Price: I worked out a wonderful relationship in 1963 whereby I teach one semester a year. For the last few years that's been the spring semester. I teach two courses; I teach two days a week and usually come in part of another day for conferences. Since college terms have gotten so short, I'm really teaching under four months a year. I put most of my energy during that four months into the teaching. It's been sort of like crop rotation: teaching fourth months, writing for eight, then teaching four. But since I've now made myself a member of the short-story class, I continue writing during my teaching semesters.

I get a tremendous sense of reward from the students I work with. I generally teach the poetry of Milton, and I have about forty-give people in that class. In the writing class, ideally I have about twelve—this semester I have fifteen, which is a little bit larger than I wanted, but there were that many good people. I wanted to be a teacher as far back as I wanted to be a writer, and i know that my wanted to be a teacher was a result of my having such disciplined and demanding teachers in my childhood. I came along in the last great age of the old-made schoolteacher, and i was tremendously responsive to those women. It's one of my great joys now that I'm still in touch with some of them.

CA: It's widely felt that students don't come to college with the background in reading that students used to bring to college—back in the days of those old-maid schoolteachers. How do you deal with that in teaching?

Price: I was an undergraduate at Duke from 1951 to 1955, and partly I try to remind myself that among my own contemporaries there were lots of boys who'd never read the daily paper, much less Tolstoy. So we may be looking back at the past with much too rosy spectacles. But there's very little one can do for the student who's eighteen or twenty-one and comes in saying he's never read anything. You can hand him basic lists of whatever books you think are indispensable for whatever kind of work he hopes to do —and I've known the rare students who have actually taken off a couple of years and worked at a pizza restaurant or whatever to read their way through the books they'd never read.

But it's unfortunate if people don't read those books while they're young. I know the reading I did before I was sixteen or so sank into me in a way that nothing ever has since—partly, I guess, because our minds aren't nearly as full of stuff when we're children as they are later. Our files get so crowded as we get older. I'm really thrilled that, sort of by accident, I read *Anna Karenina* when I was fourteen or fifteen, and *Madame Bovary*. I can see now what great books they are, but they don't take the top of my head off the way they did when I first read them. I remember the moment in which I finished the scene of Emma Bovary's death, and it was as though a tornado had hit the

house. Now I read it and I think its' a very great novel, I'm glad it exists, but I'm not swept off to Kansas on my bicycle.

CA: North Carolina seems an uncommonly fertile and nurturing ground for writers. Do you have any thoughts on why this is so?

Price: I think with all its woes and with all its insistence on sending Jesse Helms to the Senate, North Carolina has a gentler brand of Southern life than most of the deeper Southern states. It's a more welcoming place. It's more prepared to tolerate the kinds of people that writers generally are—prickly customers, gadflies on the hide of society. But I think we owe the present bonanza of fine novelists and poets and dramatists to the existence of wonderful universities and colleges in the state; that's the ultimate reason. There's a nexus of Duke and Chapel Hill and North Carolina State all within twenty miles of one another. And a great many of the people who went to those universities have decided to continue to live here because it is such a good place.

CA: Unlike some major writers born in the South, you stayed in the South, without a rebellion or an apology. For people who haven't read what you've written on the subject, would you talk about that choice and how you think it has affected your writing?

Price: In my childhood and adolescence, aside from a few bad experiences with my childish contemporaries, I had a very good experience in the South. I wasn't aware that I was in the South; I was aware that I was in a loving family in towns that I mostly liked. So I never felt, "Oh my God, get me out of Dixie" and caught the Silver Meteor to streak out of Raleigh to Penn Station, which a lot of my contemporaries and slightly older people did. I will, though, have to be honest and say that my return to the South after I'd spent three years in graduate school in England was fortuitous. I'd been in my last year at Oxford thinking I had to try to get a job from three or four thousand miles away, and I suddenly got a letter from Duke, my alma mater, asking if I'd accept a three-year contract to come back and teach freshman English. It seemed the easiest way on earth to solve the problem of getting a job from that far away. So I came back in 1958 and began teaching at Duke. One thing led to another, the way it can do in life, and I've simply stayed here because it turned out that I never wanted to go anywhere else. I don't know what would have happened if I'd been offered a good job at Swarthier. Or at Dartmouth—I might have wound up living in New England. I had not passionately planted my banner on Southern soil and said, "I proclaim this my homeland forevermore." But that's the way it turned out, and I have no regrets, far from it.

CA: Are there movies under way now from any of the novels?

Price: Movies in my career have been under way forever. *A Long and Happy Life* was sold to the movies about ten minutes after it was published. Now it's had literally about a dozen movie options on it. *Kate Vaiden* seems very close to becoming a film, and a very fine artist has bought *The Tongues of Angels*, which is presently having a screenplay written—not by me. I hope that's going to be done. I did one television play on request for American Playhouse, a play called "Private Contentment," which they produced beautifully. That was very satisfying. But so far I've had no feature films. I'd love to see

one. I've loved movies since I was old enough to be carried into them, and I'd be delighted to see what someone would make of a book of mine. I hope I'll get to eventually.

CA: You mentioned earlier the novel that you're working on now. Do you have plans beyond that, or long-range goals for your writing?

Price: No. I just want to keep doing more of the same. I have a book of three long stories coming out this spring from Atheneum. It's called *The Foreseeable Future*. And I've just had *New Music* published, a trilogy of plays produced last year in Cleveland. They cover over forty years in the life of a family. And I'm about to finish this new novel. That's what's on my plate at the moment, and I don't have specific plans for anything else. But that doesn't worry me, because I almost never have plans from one book to the next.

Source: Jean W. Ross, "Interview with Reynolds Price," in *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 37, Gale Research, 1988, pp. 358-66.

Adaptations

A Long and Happy Life is one of five novels that Price reads from on *Reynolds Price Reads*, an audio collection published from the American Audio Prose Library and available online at www.audible.com.

Price discussed the use of his North Carolina as a bonding force in his fiction in "Reynolds Price," a 1989 entry in the Public Broadcasting System's *Writer's Workshop* series, released on video by PBS.

Topics for Further Study

The people in this novel live in a rural area with electric lights and telephones, but they possess not much more in the way of modern conveniences. Write an essay explaining how the story would have been different if they had the technology available today.

Explain the leech that attaches to Wesley's leg when he is swimming in Mason's Lake. What kind of leeches are found in North Carolina? What are their habits? What other species are found around the country?

At the Christmas pageant, Rosacoke smells paregoric on the baby's breath. Research various potions and elixirs that people have given babies throughout history, including at least one currently popular method for quieting them.

Research some of the songs of mourning that you think may have been sung at Mildred Sutton's funeral and play them for your class.

Compare and Contrast

1962: The space race is going ahead with full force. The first American orbits around the earth this year.

Today: Space travel is taken for granted and is hardly noted in the news. The international space station has humans in orbit around the earth at all times.

1962: Infant mortality—the number of children who die before they reach one year of age—averages 26 out of 1000 in America. This number is even higher in rural areas and for children born outside of hospitals.

Today: Modern medical procedures have the infant mortality rate below 8 in 1000.

1962:A wealthy aviation enthusiast, like the novel's Heywood Betts, might have a small, propeller-driven biplane, with passengers' heads exposed in the open breeze.

Today: A wealthy aviation enthusiast would own a Cessna or Piper private jet.

1962: Popular music is dominated by white artists. In the coming years, black musicians will begin to directly influence the American music scene through white artists like Elvis, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones—who take old blues musicians as their inspiration—and by the Motown sound.

Today: Black musicians are at least as celebrated as white musicians, although there are still separate stations for predominantly black music, referred to as "urban" or "R&B."

What Do I Read Next?

The history of the Mustian family begins several years earlier than the setting of *A Long and Happy Life*. Milo is fifteen in *A Generous Man*. This is available in the collection *Rosacoke and Her Kin*, which includes *A Generous Man*, *A Chain of Love*, *A Long and Happy Life* and *Good Hearts*. It is published by Scribner Paperback Fiction.

The story of Price's 1984 bout with crippling spinal cancer, his interaction with the medical profession, and his recovery are examined by the author in *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, published by Plume in 1995.

Many critics have pointed out the resemblance between Price's characters and the characters of fellow Southerner Carson McCullers in her 1940 classic *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, a story about the residents of a Georgia mill town who labor under a sense of isolation.

Eudora Welty was considered one of America's finest fiction writers, certainly one of the finest writers about Southern values and customs. She was also a friend of and collaborator with Reynolds Price. Her novels are all meticulously crafted, but readers can find echoes of *A Long and Happy Life* most clearly in her story "First Love," found in *Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, published in 1982 by Harvest Books.

Further Study

Kaufman, Wallace, "Notice I'm Still Standing: Reynolds Price," in *Conversations with Reynolds Price*, edited by Jefferson Humphries, University of Mississippi Press, 1991, pp. 5-29.

Kaufman, a personal friend and collaborator with Price, combines two conversations with the author, from 1966 and 1971. Much of the focus of the earlier interview is on *A Long and Happy Life*.

Rooke, Constance, *Reynolds Price*, Twayne Publishers, 1983.

This is one of the few overviews of Price's career and it contains extensive and interesting background about *A Long and Happy Life*.

Schiff, James A., *Understanding Reynolds Price*, University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Schiff's chapter on the Mustian novels traces Price's history of Rosacoke's family, from the first short story in which they appeared in 1958 to the 1988 novel that catches up with Rosacoke and Wesley's marriage nearly thirty years after the publication of *A Long and Happy Life*.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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