

Lost in the City: Stories Study Guide

Lost in the City: Stories by Edward P. Jones

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Lost in the City: Stories Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.....	3
The First Day.....	5
The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed.....	6
Young Lions.....	8
The Store.....	10
An Orange Line Train to Ballston and The Sunday Following Mother's Day.....	12
Lost in the City and His Mother's House.....	14
A Butterfly on F Street and Gospel.....	16
A New Man, A Dark Night, and Marie.....	18
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	35



The Girl Who Raised Pigeons

The Girl Who Raised Pigeons Summary

Robert Morgan and Clara date and become engaged. One of the first people they tell of their engagement is Jenny Creed, a lifelong friend of Clara. After they marry, Robert and Clara move into an apartment in Jenny and Walter Creed's house. Soon enough the couple delivers a baby girl, Betsy Ann Morgan. When Betsy Ann is only a few weeks old, however, Clara dies of a wasting disease. For several weeks Robert's family cares for the infant but they soon return to their own demands and lives. Robert despairs of raising an infant alone since he is still a teenager but Jenny convinces him that he can do it with the help of the neighbors. Over the next years, Robert raises Betsy Ann and becomes something of a minor neighborhood hero.

During the primary narrative of the story, Betsy Ann Morgan, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, lives with her father Robert in a rented apartment. Their longtime landlords, Walter and Jenny Creed, live in the same home and Jenny acts as a surrogate mother to Betsy Ann. Robert's barber and friend, Miles Patterson, raises pigeons as a hobby. Betsy visits the pigeon coop as an eight-year-old child and is very frightened by the pigeons flocking around Miles. Three years later, she revisits the coop and finds the pigeons admirable and desires to have some of her own. Robert indulges Betsy Ann, makes her a coop and brings home a few of Miles' pigeons. At first, the birds fly back to Miles' coop every night and Betsy Ann fetches them home every morning. Miles takes this in stride while Betsy Ann finds it confusing. Eventually the birds roost in Betsy Ann's coop. Over the next several years, Betsy Ann raises pigeons. Robert visits the coop early every morning before going to work intending to carry away any dead birds he finds to spare Betsy Ann the pain of loss. Even so, Robert's dedication does not pay off because the pigeons that do die are found later in the day by Betsy Ann.

When Betsy Ann is fourteen, she is caught shoplifting candy. Although it is her first offense, and apparently her last flirtation with amoral behavior, her father is deeply offended by her choice. Although the father-daughter family has enjoyed a strong bond for a decade, the shoplifting incident causes Robert to begin to mistrust his daughter. He does not treat her the same afterward and he regularly checks up on her whereabouts. His task becomes difficult because of the long hours he has to work to provide for the family. Betsy Ann becomes even closer to Jenny Creed during this period. At roughly the same time, the character of the neighborhood begins to change in negative ways, including the appearance of numerous abandoned buildings. One morning when Betsy Ann is fifteen, Robert performs his morning scan of the pigeon coop and discovers that rats have invaded from a nearby deserted building. The rats have killed and partially eaten several pigeons, mortally wounding or horribly disfiguring most of the others. Only two pigeons have escaped serious injury. Robert kills the disfigured birds, gathers the bodies, and carries them away while Betsy Ann stays inside with Jenny. The two surviving pigeons fly away and do not return. Betsy Ann is saddened but does not get more pigeons. That phase of her life has ended.



The Girl Who Raised Pigeons Analysis

The story of Betsy Ann Morgan, the protagonist, is not presented in chronological order, beginning with Betsy as an adolescent and then her birth and upbringing are presented. Metaphorically, her experience with pigeons is also presented with non-linear chronology. Betsy Ann's pigeon-raising activities occur from late 1957 through 1961. The pigeons are symbolic of several aspects of maturation and change. They can be viewed as the Morgan family itself where the destruction of the pigeons represents the death of Clara and the pain experienced by Robert. The two surviving pigeons represent Betsy Ann and Robert. The pigeons can be viewed as a symbol of Betsy Ann's adolescent innocence obtained at around eleven and lost at around age fifteen. Reaching the age of fifteen also marks the beginning of the end of her innocence. Her shoplifting episode results in Robert's increasing surveillance and distance. Betsy transitions from innocence to sexual maturity. Alternately, the story itself can be viewed as allegorical for the gradual shift in the neighborhood from family-centered and localized urban area full of lower-class values toward one riddled with petty crime, abandoned buildings, and a lack of values. While Robert's intention to shelter Betsy Ann from the pain of loss is admirable and understandable to any parent, it is also an impossible task. Betsy Ann knows the world of the pigeons far better than Robert and she is prepared to take the bad with the good. Her interest can survive the daily vicissitudes but does not persist beyond the horrific destruction of her coop by rats. Her attempts to woo the two surviving pigeons back to the coop are compelling but simultaneously pathetic, if interpreted symbolically. Note that Betsy Ann obtains the pigeons, symbols of innocence, from Miles Patterson, who is "a bachelor...a virgin...fifty-six years old and for the most part...[knowing] no more about the world than what he could experience...in his own neighborhood" (pg. 3.) The story is one of the longest in the collection.

The First Day

The First Day Summary

A five-year-old girl prepares to attend her first day of public school. She is given an unusually hearty breakfast and dressed in new clothing. Her hair is fussed over and styled nicely. Then her mother takes her to a particular school that has an established reputation. The school is near the girl's mother's church. The officials at the school explain that the district does not have open admission and the family lives beyond the boundaries. The mother and daughter are directed to another school. The mother is distraught but complies. At the new school she enlists the assistance of another child's mother, explains that she is illiterate, and has the other woman fill out the forms for admission. The girl then enters the public school.

The First Day Analysis

The story is related from the first-person point of view where the narrator is a five-year-old girl focused on going to school for the first time. The story is quite basic and at five pages, is the shortest in the collection. It is however rich in symbols and meaning. The story can only fully be understood in the social context of an urban center faced with poverty and racial tension. The mother is illiterate and poor. The child's meal of milk, oatmeal, and brown sugar is noted as being uncommon, and her wearing of new clothing is worthy of excitement. The daughter believes the mother selects the first school because it is near her church, but is far more likely the mother believes that particular school to be superior in various ways. The slight description of the school workers suggests the first school is more affluent. Being illiterate, the mother does not know how to navigate the school system and remains at the mercy of the various administrators who tell her the daughter cannot attend school out of her boundaries. The second half of the story deals with the unhappy walk and enrollment in the second school. The mother is quite dedicated, as she produces a full suite of documentation about the daughter including a baptismal record, rent receipts, and records of immunization. The mother-daughter relationship is strong and if the mother's dedication is any indication, the daughter can look forward to academic success.



The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed

The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed Summary

Cassandra G. Lewis, the protagonist of the story, is a foul-mouthed and bad-tempered teenage girl in the process of flunking out of high school. She smokes heavily. The boys she knows have nicknamed her Tank and Mack Truck, apparently a conflation of her physicality and her exceptionally forceful personality. Cassandra dislikes school and yearns for an encounter with an instructor which can lead to a physical altercation. Cassandra is somewhat homeless but spends much of her time living with her sister and brother-in-law, although she routinely fights with both of them. Cassandra idolizes Rhonda Ferguson, her friend and a neighborhood celebrity. Rhonda has recorded a song that is becoming a hit on the radio. Rhonda has landed some type of contract and expects to begin touring with her music. Rhonda's father acts as her manager and he has always been supportive of and polite to Cassandra. After school one day, Cassandra meets up with Melanie Cartwright and Anita Hughes. Cassandra and Melanie are longtime friends but they have met Anita only recently. Melanie tells Cassandra that Gladys Harper, another associate, needs a ride to her father's house in a distant neighborhood. As Cassandra is driving her brother-in-law's car, she decides to take Gladys who has promised money for the service. At the Harper's house, Gladys' mother Mildred explains that she has recently separated from her husband and wants to send Gladys over to her estranged spouse's house with the remainder of his belongings. She gives Cassandra twenty dollars and gas money, loads a few boxes, and then the four girls set off for Anacostia.

During the drive, Cassandra and Melanie argue about musical tastes and the four girls stop off at the apartment of Joyce Moses and Pearl Guthrie. Joyce and Pearl are pregnant teenagers who have pooled resources to rent an apartment together. They are just moving in when their friends stop by. The four girls continue their trip, now arguing about who is to blame for teen pregnancy. Gladys' father lives in a small house with his new girlfriend. He invites the girls inside but they decline. Gladys is obviously angry with her father. They deliver the boxes and start to drive back home. Cassandra and Melanie get into a fight about liking boys and then the car stalls and dies. A nearby young man named Wesley approaches the girls and offers to work on the vehicle. By his accent and mannerisms, Cassandra deduces that he recently arrived from the country. Wesley fixes the vehicle, declines payment, and then asks Cassandra to the movies. Meanwhile Melanie has gone inside a neighboring house where she is sexually assaulted. The girls get into the car and drive away. Melanie explains that the man who assaulted her was quite cute and if he had only known how to ask, she would have found him appealing. Cassandra gets angry and becomes verbally abusive and Melanie breaks down in tears and jumps out of the car when it stops. Anita and Gladys follow Melanie and eventually talk her into getting back into the car. The girls continue their trip home and begin to play the radio and then they begin to sing Rhonda's hit song. Anita sings the song and Cassandra approves of her rendition. The girls finally return to their own neighborhood where they learn that Rhonda Ferguson has been shot and killed.



The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed Analysis

The story is written in simple language where the narration mirrors the protagonist's educational level and attitudes. Although much of the texture comes through in dialogue, the narration also assumes much of the language of the protagonist. Stock phrases like "death mistake" (p. 35), "it-take-two-to-tango" (p. 42), "[y]ou got that right, sugar" (p. 42) and "[p]ut that in your pipe and smoke it" (p. 43) occur throughout and provide the bulk of Cassandra's logical reasoning. Note that the story contains a large amount of explicit profanity. For Cassandra, the world is black and white with no gray zone until her heroine Rhonda is killed. Of the four main characters in the story, Anita and Gladys are fairly unimportant although present in most of the narrative. Gladys is mad at her father and Anita has a good singing voice, but both of them are minor characters. Most of the narrative tension lies between Cassandra and Melanie. Melanie is apparently physically quite attractive, definitively flirtatious, and possessed of low standards and exceptionally poor judgment. She reminisces about a man who sexually assaulted her that "he'd be a real nice guy if he wasn't so rough...he was cute" (p. 48.) For Melanie, life is about being attractive to men and engaging with men in any type of physical exchange. Cassandra's nickname of Mack Truck suggests she has a distinctively different history of interacting with men. Indeed, when she meets Wesley she appears nearly unable to treat him as anything other than an irritation and she is deeply distrustful of his motivation. This disparate view of things leads to an inevitable confrontation between Cassandra and Melanie that is resolved only by the intercession of Anita and Gladys. Although the story is named for Rhonda Ferguson, she is but a minor character. She symbolizes the hope of escape from poverty and crime that Cassandra feels. For Cassandra, the fact that Rhonda is about to escape is significant because it means that perhaps Cassandra can escape. Rhonda has also promised to take Cassandra with her. Rhonda's death therefore causes Cassandra's world to crumble. Cassandra will not escape because Rhonda will not escape. Neither can she escape because life is inescapable.



Young Lions

Young Lions Summary

Caesar Matthews is a twenty-four-year-old criminal. He commits murder eight months previous to the opening of the story and he always carries a gun. He lives with Carol, a woman who picked him up at a dance club. Caesar views Carol as a resource and a sexual object, but Carol appears to have deeper feelings for Caesar. Caesar occasionally works as a bartender for Manny Soto, a local fence and widely known criminal figure. Manny always chuckles when he talks, as if everything is a joke to him. Caesar had been recruited to the world of crime as a teenager by Sherman Wheeler, an older man who took Caesar off the streets and taught him how to work confidence games and burglaries. Sherman used to live in an apartment building with Sandra Wallington, who lived a few doors down with their children. Although Sherman did not live with his family, he appeared fairly family-oriented and always listened to cassette tape recordings of his children playing. Sherman would always do the legwork and research to set up a confidence game or scam and then Caesar would execute the plan. In his downtime, Caesar pursued typical criminal pursuits such as burglary and robbery. A few months before the opening of the story, Sherman overdosed on drugs and went into a rehabilitation program. Following this, he had simply vanished, leaving Caesar off-balance. Manny calls Caesar in for a talk and lets him know that Sherman has been located, acting as a security guard at one of the Smithsonian Museums. Caesar is nonplussed.

Caesar spends the next few days watching his latest mark, a retarded woman with a full-time job. He follows her everywhere and establishes her pay schedule. Caesar then reminisces about an old fight with his father who had ejected him for entering into the life of petty crime. Eventually Caesar had left home and returned with Sherman to rob his father's house. As the retarded woman's payday approaches, Caesar tells Carol that she must help him steal the woman's money. Carol objects but goes along with the ploy. She approaches the retarded woman as she exits the bank and tells her a sob story about a fictional 'son' that requires money for surgery. The woman tearfully hands over her earnings and Carol absconds with Caesar. An argument then ensues as Carol weeps and complains about the relationship. Finally, Caesar beats her and takes the money, stalking away into the night, and thinking about finding a new place to sleep.

Young Lions Analysis

The story is divided into five enumerated segments and features a quite complex chronology that is not related in a linear fashion. The narrative focuses on three periods of Caesar's life such as his break with his father, his friendship and training with Sherman, and his current relationship with Carol. The three periods are all related in a fragmentary method that intersperses present-tense scenes with memories of earlier events. The story's tone is exceptionally brutal and negative where Caesar is a



murderer, a thief, and an abuser of women. He works occasional shifts as a bartender but makes the bulk of his money by stealing it from others. He has robbed convenience stores, burglarized upscale homes, and during the story, steals money from a mentally handicapped woman and then beats up his girlfriend. Easily the character who evokes the least sympathy in the collection of stories, Caesar has no redeeming values whatsoever. The story's title refers to Caesar's role in society as a strong and young despoiler. The other characters in the story are equally unsympathetic. Manny is a criminal figure who works as a fence and apparently enjoys causing trouble in others' lives. Sherman, whom Caesar takes as a father figure for a brief period, is a burglar, thief, and drug abuser who runs out on his family. Even Carol, marginally sympathetic, allows Caesar to project her into the role of thief and then gets beat up for her troubles. The story presents a hyper-realistic and discouraging look at urban poverty and crime.



The Store

The Store Summary

In *The Store*, the protagonist comes of age while working as an employee in a local grocery store. As a teenager, the protagonist gets a job as a mail clerk but becomes discouraged when he is consistently passed over for promotion due to his race. At the age of twenty, he quits and spends four months unemployed. During this period, an encounter with a white policeman leaves him frustrated and scared and he responds by remaining within his own familiar neighborhood. When his best friend Lonny gets married and joins the service, the protagonist looks for work and applies at Al's and Penny's Grocery store on 5th and O streets. He is hired by Penelope "Penny" Jenkins and spends the first day mucking out the side yard. The protagonist vacillates about the job as it is unpleasant but he has a strong work ethic inherited from his father. He decides to try it for a week and Penny is pleasantly surprised by his efforts. Over the next several months, the protagonist works at the shop, learns the trade from Penny, and listens to her many platitudes about being in business. One day, the protagonist meets Kentucky Connors, a young woman who takes his fancy. She declines his initial flippant offer for a date. Time goes on until the summer of 1962 and the protagonist again asks Kentucky on a date and this time she accepts. Their relationship soon becomes serious. The protagonist comes to feel quite connected with Penny, the store, and the neighborhood. As Kentucky's financial prospects grow with education, she encourages the narrator to leave his job at the store but he declines.

One of Penny's favorite customers is Patricia Turner, a young girl who buys things on credit at her mother's request. The Turners' bill is huge, chronically late, and never paid in full. Penny however indulges Patricia. Then one day Penny leaves the store and driving her lavender Cadillac, accidentally hits and kills Patricia. The police arrive and Penny is carried away to jail. The protagonist closes the store but returns on Monday and reopens. Over the next weeks, Penny is released but she never returns to the neighborhood, too ashamed of the accident. Some families, like the Turners, refuse to patronize the shop but most of them return. The protagonist takes on an expanded role as employee and manager. Over the next months, the protagonist meets often with Penny to plan business moves and supply purchases but eventually the decisions are left more and more to the protagonist. After about a year, he asks for a raise and Penny suggests that as he is the manager he should make whatever determination he thinks reasonable. In 1965 the protagonist hires a local woman to assist in the store. Some weeks later a serious fight between the protagonist and Kentucky ends their relationship. She is frustrated that all he aspires to is to run the store. A few months later, Penny sells the store and gives the protagonist a large share of the proceeds. He uses these to attend university at the age of twenty-six.



The Store Analysis

The Store is the longest story in the collection and is narrated from the first-person point of view. It is often considered the strongest story in the collection. The story splits narrative attention between the development and experience of the protagonist and the changing character of the neighborhood in which the store is located. The narrator and protagonist begins the narrative as a young man with some experience but with a fairly pessimistic world view based on a few racially-motivated experiences with discrimination. He takes a job simply as a source of pay but comes to take great pride in his work. By the end of the story, he feels he has become an integral part of the neighborhood and culture in which he has worked for a considerable amount of time. This essentially positive experience leads him to attempt a university education. In this way, his experience leads him outside of a controlled environment and into a larger, diverse, and more-complex environment. During this transitional period, the narrator gains and then loses a lover who seems exasperated at the pace of his personal growth. The story's second focus is the character of the neighborhood in which the store is situated. The story provides a rich background and enjoyable texture to the area by several methods. Customers are presented as minor characters and their purchases are often enumerated. For example, the catalog description of grocery goods is enjoyable and distinct as well as the unusual fact that the store carries coal oil is discussed. The connection of the grocery store to the lives of many customers is noted and developed. The page 91 reference to the Washington Senators contextualizes the story in time. The mention of "a car slamming on brakes" (p. 95) foreshadows in a minor way the death of the young girl.



An Orange Line Train to Ballston and The Sunday Following Mother's Day

An Orange Line Train to Ballston and The Sunday Following Mother's Day Summary

In *An Orange Line Train to Ballston*, Marvella "Velle" Watkins uses the city subway system to take her children to school and travel to and from work. She is a single mother of three, Marvin, Marcus, and Avis. One day on the train, they sit next to a man who wears his hair in dreadlocks. The children stare at him and then ask about his hair. The man is very friendly and engages the kids in conversation. Over the next several weeks and months Marvella and her children occasionally meet the man and numerous other minor conversations ensue. Marvella begins to be attracted to the man and continues to hope that he will make some action to signal a reciprocal attraction. She begins to time her arrival at the subway in an attempt to catch the same train as the man. As her interest in him grows his appearances become less and less frequent and then he does not appear again at all.

The Sunday Following Mother's Day tells a multi-generational story about the Williams family but focuses on Madeleine Williams. She is the daughter of Samuel and Agnes Williams. Her older brother, Samuel Jr., is six years older than she is when the narrative chronology begins. When Madeleine is four years old her father Samuel Sr. murders her mother Agnes by stabbing her to death. After the murder Samuel Sr. called his sister Maddie and told her what he had done. Maddie called the police and Samuel Sr. arrested, convicted, and sentenced to serve a twenty-five year term in prison. Samuel Jr. and Madeleine thereafter live with Maddie and her boyfriend Bo Cromwell. The children frequently visit their father in prison, but when Samuel Jr. turns thirteen he announces he will not visit any more. Madeleine continues visits until she is a teenager and then gradually stops visiting her father. Samuel Jr. rejects all communication attempts but Madeleine writes fairly routinely. When she is about twenty, Madeleine takes Curtis Wallace as a lover and they deliver a son. Madeleine names her son Samuel and it is quickly discovered that he is severely mentally handicapped, being barely aware of his surroundings. Madeleine chooses to place him in a public home for care. When Madeleine is about twenty-four her brother Samuel Jr. marries Hazel Watts and she delivers a son who is healthy. After twenty years of incarceration, Samuel Sr. is released from prison. He gets a job as a short order cook and continues to write Madeleine. When Samuel Jr. discovers Madeleine is in routine communication with their father an intense fight ensues. Later, on the day following mother's day, Samuel Sr. calls unannounced on Madeleine and arrives just as she is leaving to visit her son Samuel in the facility. Samuel Sr. drives her and participates in a long and unsuccessful visit. Madeleine is uncomfortable and angry throughout the visit and at the end berates her father for being so shabby in appearance and so uncertain in reliability. At the end of the



story Madeleine watches her father try and fix his unreliable automobile in the street near her apartment, feeling trapped by his presence.

An Orange Line Train to Ballston and The Sunday Following Mother's Day Analysis

An Orange Line Train to Ballston is a short piece that describes a series of chance meetings on a subway between a single mother, her children, and a man that the children find interesting and the mother finds attractive. Over the course of several months, the man and children have several incidental conversations as the mother's interest increases. Then the man does not ride the train any more. The connection between the family and the man are essentially ephemeral and in this respect parallel the prior relationships inferred between Marvella and the absent father of her children.

The Sunday Following Mother's Day is a multi-generational story where many of the characters share the same first and last name. Samuel Williams Sr. is the father of Samuel Williams Jr. and the grandfather of Samuel Williams, Madeleine Williams' son. Madeleine is named after her aunt, Maddie Williams, who raises her. The remaining characters have different names such as Agnes, Hazel, Curtis, and Bo but they are all minor characters in the narrative. This repetitive use of names serves to integrate characters in the narrative. The central tension of the story revolves around the dysfunctional acts within the Williams' family. Samuel Williams murders his wife apparently without provocation or motive. After, he anticipates punishment and accepts it, even refusing to defend himself in court. Madeleine spends her entire young adulthood researching the case and trying to find reason in the action but there is none. The senseless crime leaves the family shattered. Samuel Jr. reacts by completely rejecting his father but Madeleine reacts by maintaining an arm's-length relationship. After his release, Samuel Sr. slowly moves to establish normal relationships but by this point in his life he is culturally repulsive to his daughter. He is an old, ugly, toothless, and disheveled ex-convict. She is a young, wealthy, and successful woman. Her life is built on routine and schedule, yet he shows up unannounced and literally a day late. Her visit to her son is usually a proscribed event that follows a routine. Her father's presence at the visit prolongs it and makes Madeleine's exit uncertain. She finds she is unable to accept him and yet fears to fully reject him.



Lost in the City and His Mother's House

Lost in the City and His Mother's House Summary

In *Lost in the City*, Lydia Walsh is an unmarried professional woman living in a gated community. Although her employment is not explained in the story, it does involve attending social functions of business. She habitually meets men and takes them home for sexual intercourse. She is a heavy drinker and uses cocaine heavily. Her friend, Gail Saunders, also drinks heavily and presumably leads a similar lifestyle. At the opening of the story, Lydia is in bed with a strange man when the telephone rings in the middle of the night and a hospital informs her that Cornelia, her mother, has died. The news is not unexpected but is still shocking. She dresses and calls a cab. Entering the cab, she declares that her mother has died and that she wants to become "lost in the city" (p. 148) and hands over cash. The sympathetic cab driver takes her through the back streets of the city assuming he is taking her to places she has never seen. In fact, Lydia recognizes every back street and slum area and remembers having lived, worked and grown up all over the city. She cannot ever become lost.

His Mother's House tells the story of Joyce Moses and her family. Joyce has three children from different men called Santiago, Taylor, and Clovis. Santiago, the oldest, is apparently about sixteen or eighteen during the story. Santiago, sometimes called Sandy, has a twenty-eight-year-old girlfriend named Tamara who has a child named Adam. As Santiago's and Tamara's relationship disintegrates, Tamara drops off her son, Adam, at Joyce's house claiming that she was giving the boy to Santiago as payment in full for all her debts. Joyce looks after Adam for several weeks before he is taken by municipal authorities. Joyce's lover is named Ricky and he routinely states his desire to have a child with her. Joyce encourages frequent sexual intercourse without telling Ricky that she deliberately was sterilized during her last delivery. Santiago is a local thug and uses Ricky as his driver and bodyguard. The exact nature of Santiago's criminal activities is not explained but it involves drugs and has made him a fortune. Santiago has purchased a new and expensive house for Joyce and filled it with new furniture and things. Joyce's lifelong friend Pearl has a son named Humphrey. As Joyce and Pearl grew up together, so too did Santiago and Humphrey and they are something like brothers. Yet while Santiago is the wealthy crime lord, Humphrey is the street-walking drug addict, deeply indebted to Santiago in numerous ways.

Ricky one day tells Joyce that he met Santiago's boss, Smokey Peebles. Smokey is a midget who dresses eccentrically and has a nine-year-old girl who is doused in make up as a lover, apparently not wanting to be shorter than an adult woman companion. Smokey spends his time in a malt shop. Ricky also talks about seeing vast piles of cash being counted by thirteen-year-old children. Meanwhile, Santiago continues to call on his grandmother and spend an occasional night. She knows of his activities and disapproves. When Santiago leaves a hundred dollar bill on her table one morning, she is incensed and calls Joyce to come pick up the money, telling her that Santiago is no longer welcome in her humble home. Joyce finds her mother's attitude bizarre. A little



while later, the relationship between Santiago and Humphrey becomes so strained that Santiago murders Humphrey in broad daylight as Joyce watches. A fugitive, Santiago flees the scene. Joyce calls Pearl and the two women console each other for hours. Later that night, Joyce unlocks all her doors and windows so that Santiago can easily get into the house if he wants a place to sleep.

Lost in the City and His Mother's House Analysis

In *Lost in the City*, Lydia Walsh is quite wealthy. She theorizes she has earned more in one year than both her parents earned in both of their lifetimes combined. Indeed, soon she will have earned more money than all of her ancestors combined throughout all history. The story gives its title to the collection and exemplifies the situation of living so long in one place that it is physically impossible to get lost there. The lost must then refer to something metaphysical or psychological and in this case although Lydia is wealthy and successful, she is severed from her roots and her mother's death leaves her lost.

In *His Mother's House*, the central narrative tension is built between two women's reactions to Santiago's life of crime. His mother accepts it and enjoys profiting from it regardless of the damage and loss it causes others. His grandmother refuses it and lives honorably on her own means. Santiago is an unsympathetic character. He associates with drug vendors and child molesters. Santiago demonstrates a total lack of courtesy. He does care for his family to a point but when business intersects friendship in the case of his friend Humphrey, Santiago chooses to murder Humphrey. Joyce is little better. She accepts the fruits of Santiago's crime. Although she voices sympathy with her lifelong friend Pearl, her loyalty is clearly directed toward Santiago. She allows her lover to be denigrated by her son in exchange for money and then even lies to Ricky. She attempts to conceive in order to string him along in their relationship.

The story features a peculiar inversion of societal norms wherein children become a form of currency. Tamara gives Adam to Joyce as payment for some debt she owes Santiago. Later, when Joyce meets Adam on the street, Adam's adoptive mother assumes that Joyce is either trying to steal or buy Adam. Smokey the crime boss is not only young but also a midget and his current girlfriend is only nine years old. He is entirely focused on shoe fashion and ice cream. All of the cash is being counted by thirteen-year-old children. Santiago is apparently sixteen. The only adults in the criminal world act as drivers and bodyguards. In this respect, the narrative proposes a world wherein one's societal value decreases with experience. A nine-year-old girl can act as the lover of a big-time crime boss, while the twenty-eight year old Tamara can only satisfy her debt to a sixteen-year-old lover by producing and surrendering a child. Although Humphrey has a lot of cash, it appears insufficient to pay his debt to Santiago and the debt must be serviced by Humphrey himself. The only way Joyce can keep Ricky around is to promise him they will have a child together.



A Butterfly on F Street and Gospel

A Butterfly on F Street and Gospel Summary

In *A Butterfly on F Street*, Mildred Harper, the protagonist, had been married for twenty-seven years until her husband Mansfield died five months prior to the opening of the story. About two and a half years ago, Mildred's husband abandoned her for another woman named Elizabeth Ann Coleman. While Mildred is downtown shopping she encounters Elizabeth by happenstance. Elizabeth expresses condolences for Mildred's recent loss and Mildred reflects on her life.

In *Gospel*, the protagonist Vivian L. Slater is fifty-seven years old and leads a quartet of female gospel singers. Vivian lives with Ralph, a handsome man that is dying of an unspecified disease. None of Vivian's friends know that Ralph is ill. Vivian's closest friend within the singing group is Diane McCullough, also fifty-seven years old. Diane lives with Harry and has a daughter named Cherry. During the story, Cherry is estranged from her own boyfriend and is living with Diane. The other two singers in the quartet are Maud Townsend, seventy-eight years old and blind and Anita Hughes, twenty-five years old. Anita's boyfriend is named John and she is head-over-heels in love with him. The quartet is accompanied by piano played by Counsel Smith, a young and somewhat unreliable musician. The name of the quartet is The Gospelteers. Anita's voice is widely regarded as superior and she is often approached by other gospel music groups who would like to recruit her. Vivian knows that without Anita, the Gospelteers' popularity would suffer greatly. The Gospelteers assemble and travel to The House of the Solitary Savior to perform. When they arrive, the counsel is already there, but sadly the church is on fire and as they watch it burns out of control. They sing a few impromptu verses in the street as they watch with a large crowd of people. Reverend Saunders vows publicly to rebuild his church. The women pass a few hours in conversation and then proceed to their second appointment of the day at The Holy Tabernacle. Several other gospel music groups sing while The Gospelteers ready for their performance. Jesse Mae Carson of The Heavenly Choir attempts to recruit Anita but she declines. The Gospelteers then perform superbly. On the drive home, Diane calls a brief unscheduled halt where Vivian and the other women see her talking to and kissing a man they do not recognize. It is not Harry. When Diane gets back in the car, Vivian is outraged and an argument ensues.

A Butterfly on F Street and Gospel Analysis

A Butterfly on F Street, one of the shortest pieces in the collection, tells a story of betrayal and personal reconciliation. Mildred, the protagonist, is sympathetic and a strong female character. She faces the prospect of healing alone as her estranged husband has died. His rejection of Mildred is especially troubling as it came during a prolonged period of his terminal illness.



Gospel is a story about friendship through time. The four women are all prominent characters but Vivian is the protagonist. She is closely aligned with Diane within the narrative. They are close friends and the same age. They see nearly everything in a similar way. The other two friends are old and blind or young and inexperienced. Both Vivian and Diane realize that their singing voices are aging and that without Anita they would probably not perform as often as they do. The central tension in the story arises because Vivian is caring for a dying man that Diane simply regards as handsome and attractive, without knowing he is sick. Meanwhile, Diane is stepping out on her long-time lover and the father of her daughter. Vivian is outraged at Diane's behavior and equally angry that Diane is public and flagrant about her affair, effectively announcing it to her friends by demonstration. The rift in their relationship is symbolized by the burning church and the anguished reverend. The stormy weather also symbolizes the relationship within the Gospelteers.



A New Man, A Dark Night, and Marie

A New Man, A Dark Night, and Marie Summary

In *A New Man*, the protagonist Woodrow L. Cunningham is fifty-two years old. He returns from work one day and his daughter Elaine, a young teenager, openly disregards his authority and mocks him in front of her friends. A verbal argument ensues and the next day Rita, his wife, reports that Elaine is missing. They file a police report and canvass the neighborhood, then enlist friends and associates to canvass. The search proceeds for three months without success and the police assume Elaine is a runaway. Woodrow continues searching for a year and a half and then Rita, despairing, determines that they must move away. Throughout the entire period, Woodrow's father sends him letters full of tedious details of his days. Seven years after Elaine vanished, Woodrow's father dies.

In *A Dark Night*, four women gather in a Carmena Boone's apartment to pass away the hours during a lightning storm. The women appear to be afraid of being alone during the noise, flashes, and deluge. They are shortly joined by Ida Garrett, an older neighbor. In the past, Carmena and Ida were friends. Then Ida spent several years criticizing Carmena and telling her how best to live life. Ida's increasingly dominating personality and ceaseless criticism eventually destroyed the friendship and the two women are profoundly alienated. The five women converse and Ida grates on the others. When the storm lets up, they all return to their respective apartments. When the storm begins to resume, Ida returns to Carmena's apartment. Ida is alone and truly afraid. Although she does not like Ida, Carmena allows her to come into her apartment. They retire to the bathroom, which is the darkest, quietest room in the place, behind closed doors to wait out the storm's fury.

Marie Delaveaux Wilson is the protagonist of *Marie*. She is an aged woman who lives on her Social Security payments. Marie is afraid because she finds it very difficult to comply with various Social Security regulations. She finds bus travel difficult and is especially exasperated by the long waits at the Social Security office. She has been attacked within her own neighborhood and therefore carries a kitchen knife whenever she leaves the apartment. On one occasion, she thwarted a would-be robber by slashing his hand during a purse-snatching attempt. One day, Marie is summoned to the Social Security office and is kept waiting all day because the receptionist is too distracted to tell her that the person with whom she has an appointment has left for the day. Marie is so angry at the receptionist's insulting behavior and remarks that she slaps her face and walks out. Over the next few days, Marie worries that her Social Security payments will be canceled but then she receives yet another letter telling her to attend yet another meeting. Throughout the story Marie meets with George Carter, a young university student who tape records her life story. After he completes the recording, George delivers a set of cassette tapes to Marie and she is enraptured and horrified to hear the sound of her own voice.



A New Man, A Dark Night, and Marie Analysis

Just as *A Butterfly on F Street* is a story about personal loss and family tragedy, so too is *A New Man*. Woodrow and Rita Cunningham appear in all respects as a normal black urban family. Neither has significant problems or issues, both work hard, and both conform to societal mores and norms. Their daughter Elaine appears to be a typical teenager. She is flirtatious, independent, and full of attitude. She goes well beyond this behavior however one evening by inviting boys over when her parents are gone and then openly taunting Woodrow when he returns home. Her personality change appears profound. Woodrow fairly is at a loss on how to respond and attempts a typical parental lecture. Elaine responds by running away from home. She does not return or attempt contact. Woodrow assumes Elaine has runaway but nagging doubts are inescapable. He worries if something more dire has occurred. Eventually Rita loses all connection with the area and wants to move away. Woodrow deals with the impending death of his father and remembers his own strong childhood connection with his parents. The story is an interesting contrast of the so-called generation gap.

A Dark Night has a straightforward structure and basic characterization. The story features an unusually textured sense of place and setting. Much of the narrative concerns the physical aspects of the storm itself. The narrative's focus on a single point during a furious storm mimics the claustrophobic feeling of the two estranged friends huddled in a dark bathroom. The story features themes of forced reconciliation and the nature of friendships' changes over time.

Marie features an interesting narrative device of having the protagonist record her personal story and then presenting the recording's transcription as text. Extended segments of the story are thus narrated directly by the protagonist. Marie's gradual refusal to be controlled by external forces is demonstrated by her attacking the attacker and when she slaps the officious and rude receptionist. Marie's essentially good character is revealed by her prolonged agonizing over her behavior at the Social Security office. Marie's distaste of her own voice's sound is a common experience to most.



Characters

Robert Morgan appears in *The Girl Who Raised Pigeons*

Robert Morgan is not the protagonist in the story but he is one of the major characters that presents a marked contrast to many of the other principle male characters presented in the collection of stories. He is a black man with a daughter. His wife and her mother died from wasting disease shortly after delivering Betsy Ann. Robert married when he was just eighteen and within ten months was a father and within two further months was a single father. His initial reaction was understandably feeling overwhelmed and incompetent. However, his family and friends assisted him to transition into the role of father. He has raised Betsy Ann while living in a rented apartment in the home of Jenny and Walter Creed. Jenny has become something of a mother figure to Betsy Ann. Robert supports his daughter by working long hours each day. He sees in her his own hope for the future and is a very protective and able father. Robert allows Betsy Ann to adopt some pigeons. He builds a coop and for the next several years, he rises very early every morning to check the coop for dead birds so he can spare Betsy Anne's feelings.

Robert's relationship with Betsy Ann becomes strained and then fundamentally changes however. Betsy Ann is caught shoplifting and Robert is aghast at her behavior, correctly demanding that he raised her better than shoplifting. Although Betsy Ann does indeed reform, her father partially withdraws from her. She attributes this solely to her shoplifting but there is undeniably an element of her impending maturity involved in the distance that grows. When the story opens, Betsy Ann is fifteen and Robert is thirty-three. At the end of the story, Robert discovers that rats have invaded the pigeon coop and maimed many of the birds. He tells Betsy Ann to stay inside while he euthanizes the maimed animals and collects the dead.

Cassandra G. Lewis appears in *The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed*

Cassandra G. Lewis, the protagonist of *The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed*, is a foul-mouthed and bad-tempered teenage girl in the process of flunking out of high school. She smokes heavily. The boys that she knows have nicknamed her Tank and Mack Truck, describing both her physicality and exceptionally forceful personality. Cassandra dislikes school and hopes that one day a teacher will give her some pretense of an excuse to start a physical altercation. Cassandra appears to be more-or-less homeless, although she frequently stays with her sister and brother-in-law. Her relationship even with these caregivers is quite strained and she drives a car that she stole from her brother-in-law. Cassandra idolizes Rhonda Ferguson, her friend and a neighborhood celebrity. Rhonda has recorded a song that is becoming a hit on the



radio. Cassandra mistakenly believes that Rhonda has found a way to escape the crushing poverty of the neighborhood. Cassandra has several friends although she treats them poorly. She is at least marginally attractive on some level because a young man she meets asks her to the movies. Her natural suspicions prevent her from fully accepting. Cassandra gets quite exasperated with her friends who always talk about men and sex because she feels the constant chatter is demeaning and insipid. While Cassandra is quite abrasive and refuses to apologize, she does understand the subtle complexities of friendship.

Caesar Matthews appears in Young Lions

Caesar Matthews is a twenty-four-year-old black man living with a woman of recent acquaintance. Caesar has spent the past six years living a life of escalating criminal involvement. He specializes in confidence cons or outright burglary. During a recent store robbery, Caesar murdered the store clerk for no apparent reason. Caesar occasionally does odd jobs for Manny Soto, a local fence. In the past, Caesar worked closely with an older confidence man named Sherman Wheeler. Sherman took Caesar in when he was a youngish teenager and taught him the methods of successful crime. Under Sherman's tutelage, Caesar first burglarized his own father's home and then moved on to opulent homes in the metropolitan area. Sherman seemed to prefer to specialize in scams taking prolonged setup and some measure of skill. Sherman eventually overdosed and thereafter disappeared from the criminal life, taking a job as a security guard in a museum. Caesar views Sherman's defection as a minor affront but is determined to continue being a criminal on his own merits.

Caesar tracks a retarded woman that he has marked and then forces his girlfriend to trick the retarded woman out of her paycheck. After Caesar's girlfriend gets the money, he takes it from her, beats her severely in a public park, and then leaves her on the ground. His last thoughts are where he can find a place to sleep for the night. Caesar is easily the least sympathetic character in the collection of stories in the book.

Marvella Watkins appears in An Orange Line Train to Ballston

Marvella Watkins Velle is a single mother of three children that includes two sons and a daughter. She has a full-time job and spends much of each morning riding the metro subway to take her children to school and then to go to work. The main train Marvella takes with her children is the Orange Line to Ballston, although her particular journey allows her to take a Blue Train if it arrives first as the Orange and Blue lines parallel each other along her trip. One day, Marvella's children strike up a conversation with a man who is also riding the train. The man has dreadlocks, apparently has a job with somewhat irregular hours, and is quite friendly but typically reserved. Over several weeks, Marvella and her kids see the man several times and each time her children engage him in conversation. Marvella comes to find the man attractive and begins to plan her comings and goings to maximize her chances of riding on the same line and



same train as the man. She spends a lot of time thinking about the man and wondering how she can catch his eye. The man likes Marvella's children but seems oblivious to her flirting. Eventually the man's presence on the train becomes less frequent and then one day Marvella realizes that she has not seen him for many weeks.

Madeleine Williams appears in *The Sunday Following Mother's Day*

Madeleine Williams is the protagonist in *The Sunday Following Mother's Day*. The story follows her progression from a six-year-old girl to an adult woman with a child of her own. Madeleine spends the first six years of her life in an apparently normal family situation, living with her older brother Samuel Jr. and her parents, Samuel and Agnes Williams. There is no hint of dysfunction in the family and they appear to be a normal middle-class black family living in an urban center of Washington D.C. When Madeleine is six years old, however, her father murders her mother one night while the children are sleeping. Samuel stabs Agnes repeatedly and then calls his sister, Madeleine's aunt Maddie, and tells her what he has done. Maddie calls the police who arrest Samuel. He does not attempt flight and does not resist arrest. During his trial, he offers no defense and no explanation. Samuel is sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. Madeleine and her brother go to live with their aunt Maddie. When Samuel Jr. turns thirteen, he refuses to visit his father in prison, but Madeleine keeps up sporadic visits and communications. Madeleine grows up and at age twenty, takes Curtis Wallace as a lover and about a year later, delivers a son whom she names Samuel.

Madeleine's son is severely mentally handicapped and is placed in a government home. Madeleine visits him routinely but he does not know who she is. When Madeleine is twenty-six years old, her father is released from prison. He continues to write her and he gets a job as a short order cook. Madeleine has become very successful in her profession and is wealthy. Her father stops in to visit one day, unannounced, and Madeleine is caught off-guard. They spend time together visiting her son and Madeleine feels very estranged from her father.

Lydia Walsh appears in *Lost in the City*

Lydia Walsh is a very successful professional woman who lives in her own home in a plush gated community. She dresses sharply, attends numerous professional functions, and enjoys picking up strange men for sexual liaisons. Lydia is a heavy cocaine user and drinks often. Lydia wakes one night to an incessantly ringing telephone. Somehow knowing the telephone call brings bad news, Lydia waits for many rings before answering it. The telephone call informs her that her aged mother, Cornelia, has died in hospital. The news does not come as a surprise. Lydia dresses and calls a cab. Instead of going to the hospital, however, she tells the cab driver to simply drive around and get lost in the city. She shoves a handful of cash at him and he drives through various back streets in poor neighborhoods, assuming Lydia will be unfamiliar with the areas. Instead,



Lydia recognizes every street and remembers her early life of poverty, growing up in the very areas the cab driver takes her to.

Joyce Moses appears in His Mother's House

Joyce Moses is a single mother of three children, Santiago, Taylor, and Clovis. The children have different fathers and Joyce is living with Ricky, another man. Joyce routinely promises Ricky that she will soon get pregnant and have another child with him but in fact she has been medically sterilized. Her deception of Ricky is typical of her outlook on life in which morality at best is dubious and always circumstantial. Joyce has spent most of her life in abject poverty but recently her oldest son, Santiago, a teenager, has become something of a figure in the criminal underworld of the city. Santiago has become very wealthy and has purchased for Joyce a large home in an upscale neighborhood. The home has been filled with all sorts of brand new furniture and things, much of which is still boxed up in closets or cupboards. Joyce is fully aware that her son deals in drugs and that her newly acquired wealth derives from illicit drug deals and other criminal activities but she is not concerned by this. Joyce's close friend Pearl is a lifelong acquaintance. Pearl's son, Humphrey, is the same age as Santiago and at first the two young men entered into the criminal life together. Yet while Santiago has become successful if cold-blooded, Humphrey has become a drug addict and is nominally homeless. Both men view each other's mother as a sort of surrogate mother so that Humphrey calls Joyce "Mama Joyce" and Santiago calls Pearl "Mama Pearl." Joyce's own mother is very estranged from Joyce and her children by their attitude toward crime and illegal money. When Santiago eventually murders Humphrey over some unspoken infraction, Joyce calls Pearl and consoles her but after hanging up the telephone, she surveys her home with pride.

Woodrow L. Cunningham appears in A New Man

Woodrow Cunningham is fifty-two years old, married, employed, and average in nearly all respects. He lives in an apartment with his wife and teenage daughter and spends his time working long hours to maintain a lower middle-class lifestyle. Woodrow returns home from work on day to find his daughter Elaine entertaining several strange boys in the home. He objects and tells the boys to leave. Elaine is antagonistic and openly defies her father's authority. The scene is familiar to any parent, but Elaine's defiance is well beyond normal. She is openly hostile and a brief but intense argument ensues. Woodrow appears used to Elaine's moods but is stymied by her sudden extreme hostility. That night Woodrow and his wife Rita go to sleep as usual and in the morning Elaine is gone. Woodrow files a police report but gets little support. The police assume Elaine has run away from home and Woodrow rather tends to agree. He spends the next eighteen months canvassing an ever-expanding area, knocking on doors, showing photographs, and searching for his daughter. Elaine never returns home. Meanwhile, Woodrow continues an erratic communication with his father and seven years after Elaine's disappearance Woodrow's father dies.



Carmena Boone appears in A Dark Night

Carmena Boone lives in an apartment complex near several other women. She is presented as a middle-aged black woman who is typical of her economic status and is obviously charitable to her neighbors. She enjoys the companionship of various other women in her apartment complex. Carmena's situation suggests that she is living somewhere near the poverty line and her employment status is not clarified in the story. Carmena has had a close and lengthy relationship with a neighbor named Ida Garrett for many years. Over the past few years, however, Ida's incessant criticism and harping has driven a significant wedge between the two women and during the period discussed by the story, they do not spend much time together. During one violent altercation, Carmena invites several neighbors into her apartment where they pass the hours of the storm in conversation. Ida joins them because she is afraid of the noise and flashes. Later in the evening, the other neighbors return home but Ida and Carmena retreat into Carmena's bathroom, which is the quietest room in the place. They sit in the dark and stuff towels under the door to seal out the storm's sounds. The two women sit in a strained semi-silence as Carmena contemplates their estranged friendship.

Marie Delaveaux Wilson appears in Marie

Marie Wilson is an aged black woman who is nearly blind. She lives alone although is apparently well liked by neighbors. Marie's neighborhood was once family-oriented and safe but has now become blighted with crime. She lives in an urban center that shows much decay. Marie habitually carries a serrated knife with her whenever she leaves her apartment, and she has used it on one occasion to slash a would-be purse-snatcher's hand. Marie subsists on her Social Security disability payment and lives in constant fear that the Social Security people will cut her off. She knows that any disruption in payments would be financially difficult and almost impossible to rectify. During the story, Marie is repeatedly summoned to the Social Security office to meet with various administrative officials. Every visit entails difficulty and expense for Marie but she always goes. She also always spends hours in a stuffy waiting room and often is not seen before the office closes. Meanwhile, Marie has been contacted by a young university student who is pursuing an oral history project. He tape records Marie as she reminisces about her childhood. At the end of the project Marie receives a set of tapes. After listening to a few seconds of one tape, she packages them up and puts them away, horrified at the sound of her own voice.



Objects/Places

Washington D.C. appears in All Stories

All of the stories in the collection are set in urban centers in or around Washington D.C. In this collection of stories, the city is characterized as consisting of a wealthy government core with occasional rich enclaves surrounded by a massive sprawl of poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Nearly all of the residents are black, crime is frequent and pervasive, and strong family ties are difficult to maintain. Although the stories are set in Washington D.C., they would work equally well in nearly any urban center where blight is prevalent.

Pigeons appears in The Girl Who Raised Pigeons

In The Girl Who Raised Pigeons, the protagonist, Betsy Ann Morgan, establishes a coop and raises pigeons over the span of a few years. She has good success and is a dependable and devoted caregiver. One night, rats enter the coop. They kill or maim all but two of the pigeons. The two survivors leave the coop and refuse to return. For a few weeks, they hang around the general area but eventually find a new home and are not seen again. In the narrative, the pigeons operate as symbols of maturity.

Rhonda Ferguson's Song appears in The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed

In The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed, Rhonda Ferguson has recorded a radio song that is gaining airplay and is widely regarded as outstanding. Rhonda appears to have genuine talent and plans shortly to release a record and go on tour. While the characters in the story drive in their car, Rhonda's song comes on the radio and then some of the characters sing verses of it.

The Store appears in The Store

Nearly all of The Store is set inside of a neighborhood grocery store named Al's and Penny's Grocery store, said to be on the corner of 5th and O Streets. The grocery store extends credit to locals and carries products based on local need rather than price margins. The protagonist of the story moves from employee to general manager over the course of several years.



Orange Line Train to Ballston appears in An Orange Line Train to Ballston

Most of the story An Orange Line Train to Ballson occurs in a subway station waiting for an Orange Line train or on the Orange Line train itself. For the protagonist in the story, the Orange Line and the Blue Line parallel each other through her journey allowing her to take whichever train comes first. A man who has caught her attention only rides on the Orange Line so she begins to time her trips to maximize her chances of seeing him.

The Confidence Game appears in Young Lions

In Young Lions, Caesar Matthews pursues a criminal life style. He robs stores, burglarizes houses, and performs many of the other typical acts of criminals. He appears to live fairly well and as he lives with his girlfriend he has no expenses. Caesar also pursues confidence games or elaborate setups that are used to fool people out of their money without violence. Caesar obviously enjoys tricking and controlling people because the time he invests in setting up confidence games are out of all proportion to the amount of money he receives.

Joyce Moses' New House appears in His Mother's House

In His Mother's House, Santiago has purchased a nice home in an upscale neighborhood for his mother Joyce. The home is paid with money derived from Santiago's illegal drug-selling activities. The home is full of new furniture and things and within the story is symbolic of the transient physical prizes derived from a criminal lifestyle.

The Gospelteers appears in Gospel

The four lead characters in Gospel are black women who enjoy performing gospel music in their group called The Gospelteers. The group has a good local reputation and is well established, performing multiple times every week. The group has been together for at least a few years. he women are accompanied by a pianist who is somewhat unreliable.

Thunder Storm appears in A Dark Night

In A Dark Night, the night is dark and stormy like the cliché suggests. In In the story, several women are frightened or disturbed by a violent electrical storm and seek solace by gathering together in a central apartment. The storm symbolizes the difficulties of interpersonal relationships.



Social Security appears in Marie

In Marie the protagonist, Marie, is an aged woman who depends entirely upon payments she receives from the Federal Government's Social Security program. Marie spends many days and hours waiting to speak to various Social Security workers to demonstrate that she is still blind and still old. The Social Security system presented in the story feels familiar to anyone who has had the misfortune to deal with a the red-tape of a large government office.



Themes

Poverty and Crime

Most of the protagonists in the collection live in poverty or near to poverty. Even the occasional wealthy character, such as Lydia Walsh in *Lost in the City*, comes from a childhood of poverty. Some characters, such as Marie Wilson in *Marie*, live on government payments while others work long hours for little pay. With few exceptions, then, the working characters presented work hard for their livelihoods and these working characters are by and large honorable, honest, and trustworthy. Within the setting of urban poverty, many of the characters in the collection have abandoned an honest day's work for a life of crime. Caesar Matthews in *Young Lions* is an early example of this. He grows up in a lower middle-class family with a strong father figure but rejects this life as fruitless and turns to a life of crime. Within a few years, he is a murderer, a robber, a burglar, and well-connected with other criminal figures. Caesar is a completely unlikable character but he does enjoy a relatively work-free life with sufficient income. Another such figure, Santiago Moses in *His Mother's House*, pushes drugs and makes a veritable fortune while still only a teenager. The juxtaposition of these two types of stories make it clear that the average person must either work hard for a meager living or turn to a life of crime.

Atypical Families

There are several families within the collection that are typical such as a married couple with children. However, they are not the norm. Most of families in the stories instead consist of a single mother with several children by different fathers. Many of the characters are widowed or abandoned and even within the 'typical' families of some stories, the parents are not married. Some of the characters joke about legitimate marriages as opposed to common law marriages. Partner commitment appears at best temporary and usually transient. Even when families start out conventional, such as the Morgans in *The Girl Who Raised Pigeons* or the Cunninghams in *A New Man*, they end up fractured through death, departure, or abandonment. Perhaps the primary example of this process is found in the short tale called *A Butterfly on F Street* where a husband of twenty-five years learns that he is terminally ill and abandons his wife for the care and affections of another woman. Other stories feature characters that are not related but nevertheless form a type of family. In *Gospel*, the four women are closer to each other than they are to their lovers. Another example of this type of arrangement is found in *A Dark Night* where two neighbors accept each other without liking one another.

Urban Life

All of the stories are set within an urban setting, presumably in downtown Washington D.C. or its environs. The gritty texture of urban life permeates the collection on every



page. Poverty, crime, blight, and overcrowding are common. Wealthy people separate themselves by living in gated communities. Old women carry knives to thwart robbers and houses are burglarized. Automobiles are everywhere and some characters are killed in accidents. Other characters drive stolen cars or try to coax another few miles from a decaying wreck. Characters who work usually walk to work or use public transportation. Characters that pursue criminal activities never have to look far for their next victim. The sounds and sights of urban areas are common and even the construction of the settings suggests a densely developed urban area. More than any other aspect in the collection, the recurrent theme of urban living touches every character in every story. The idea of the urban concentration gives its title to the collection and a story within the collection as if to suggest the characters and indeed the stories could next exist outside of an urban city. Urban life is a dominant theme in the stories of the collection.

Style

Point of View

Stories are presented from multiple points of view. The most commonly used point of view is third-person omniscient, where the interior thoughts and motivations of the protagonists are revealed. Narrators in third-person stories are unnamed, reliable, and entirely effaced. Within these stories, the narrators have a homogeneous voice that is objective and dispassionate. One story, *The First Day*, is narrated in the first person by a five-year-old girl going to public kindergarten for the first day of school. In this story, the narrator is sincere but obviously subjective and only partially reliable in that her observations are those of a child. In another story, *The Store*, the narrator also speaks in the first person and develops an extended story with complex characterization and an involved chronology. All of the stories are mated to a point of view suited to their presentation and the point of view utilized aids materially in accessing the story's meaning.

Setting

Presumably, all of the stories are set in Washington D.C. or its immediate environs, but most of the stories would function just as well within any urban center. Occasional references to landmarks are given such as precise street addresses, which allow some stories to be placed quite precisely. Frequently, Anacostia appears as a sort of separate tableaux which is divorced from the decaying blighted areas of urban D.C. All of the protagonists and nearly all of the characters appearing are African Americans. Nearly all are living in poverty or grew up in poverty. Crime is a recurring theme and many of the characters are criminalized or are themselves the criminals. Stable family situations are uncommon, although several stories feature happily-married protagonists. The most common scenario consists of a single mother raising children with different fathers. The stories do not shy away from difficult material or uncomfortable political situations. Yet the stories are not 'preachy' or politically motivated. Instead, the setting is used as a backdrop against which various lives are presented. The sense of place in most of the stories is tangible and many of the characters strongly identify with their physical surroundings. The sense of setting within the collection is particularly strong.

Language and Meaning

The stories in the collection are presented in standard English and use American punctuation and spelling. This should pose no special barrier to comprehension. The stories present a significant amount of explicit language and profanity usually delivered in dialogue. Some of the stories utilize light period slang but the construction allows the meaning to be derived from surrounding circumstances. Characters often speak in non-standard English using modified spelling to indicate pronunciation such as "Remember



how I useta to fix you all them banana splits piled up this high?" (p. 170.) Again, the dialogue presents no special barrier to comprehension and indeed does add a certain flavor or texture to the stories. In general, the tone of the material is serious and objective. The author clearly respects the material and the characterization is professional, objective, and enjoyable. Within the book, meaning is derived from sources typical of short fiction. Narrative plot is significantly tied to meaning, characters are presented as strong types but not caricatures, and the tone of the material is consonant with the material. Symbols are frequently used but they are not heavy-handed. Foreshadowing is occasionally used in a minor way. Some of the stories offer a clear moral lesson that adds to the overall meaning.

Structure

The 268-page collection includes fourteen titled stories of unequal length. The collection has been reprinted in at least two formats and one of the publications includes a selection entitled *A Rich Man* from another of the author's published collections. The strongest stories in the collection tend toward the front of the book. The structure of the stories varies considerably from relatively straightforward chronologies and simple characterization through a novella-like structure complete with chapters, convoluted chronology, and character development. For the most part, however, the stories are presented in a relatively straightforward methodology which invites the reader and poses no special problems to comprehension. The stories' value and impact derive from the subject matter, not necessarily from their presentation and construction. The stories are well executed and well-crafted, as you would expect of any National Book Award Finalist. Most of the stories are presented by an unnamed and entirely effaced narrator utilizing the third-person point of view. Most of the stories feature extensive dialogue which is presented in a type of phonetic spelling meant to represent the pronunciation patterns of the characters. Many of the stories contain explicit language and a few of the stories describe sexual encounters, criminal behavior, and illegal drug use.



Quotes

"Her father would say years later that she had dreamed that part of it, that she had never gone out through the kitchen window at two or three in the morning to visit the birds. By that time in his life he would have so many notions about himself set in concrete. And having always believed that he slept lightly, he would not want to think that a girl of nine or ten could walk by him at such an hour in the night without his waking and asking of the dark, Who is it? What's the matter?" (The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.)

"On an otherwise unremarkable September morning, long before I learned to be ashamed of my mother, she takes my hand and we set off down New Jersey Avenue to begin my very first day of school. I am wearing a checkered-like blue-and-green cotton dress, and scattered about these colors are bits of yellow and white and brown. My mother has uncharacteristically spent nearly an hour on my hair that morning, plaiting and re-plaiting so that now my scalp tingles. Whenever I turn my head quickly, my nose fills with the faint smell of Dixie Peach hair grease. The smell is somehow a soothing one now and I will reach for it time and time again before the morning ends. All the plaits, each with a blue barrette near the tip and each twisted into an uncommon sturdiness, will last until I go to bed that night, something that has never happened before. My stomach is full of milk and oatmeal sweetened with brown sugar. Like everything else I have on, my pale green slip and underwear are new, the underwear having come three to a plastic package with a little girl on the front who appears to be dancing. Behind my ears, my mother, to stop my whining, has dabbed the stingiest bit of her gardenia perfume, the last present my father gave her before he disappeared into memory. Because I cannot smell it, I have only her word that the perfume is there. I am also wearing yellow socks trimmed with thin lines of black and white around the tops. My shoes are my greatest joy, black patent-leather miracles, and when one is nicked at the toe later that morning in class, my heart will break" (The First Day.)

"Manny was reading the Post aloud at a table near the bar when Caesar arrived that morning. Manny was alone, which didn't make Caesar happy. The whole place was dark, except for the tiny lamp on the table. Manny did not look up at first when Caesar sat down across from him and said, 'Mornin'" (Young Lions.)

"That was Monday. He did not go back home all that week. Manny told him on Friday that he was tired of Carol calling the bar. 'Talk to her,' Manny said. 'Do something to shut that pussy up.' 'Come home,' Carol said when he finally called her Saturday afternoon. 'Come home,' Carol said when he finally called her Saturday afternoon. 'Come home.' 'You forgot what I asked you to do?' he said. 'No, I didn't forget,' she said. 'Come home.' 'Then what do you have ta say bout what I asked?' She said, 'Yes. Yes. C, I can't hurt anybody. I just can't. 'Who said anything about somebody gettin hurt? Nobody'll get hurt. I already told you.' 'Come home,' she said" (Young Lions.)



"I come about the job in the paper," I said. 'Well, you pass the first test: At least you know how to read. What else you know how to do? You ever work in a store before? A grocery store like this?'" (The Store.)

"I suppose any man could take rejection by any woman as long as he knew that the morning after he was cast out, the woman would be bundled up with her best memories of him and taken away to a castle in the most foreign of lands to live there forever, guarded by a million eunuchs and by old women who had spent their lives equating sex with death. No, no, the woman would have to say to the old women for the rest of her life, I remember different" (The Store.)

"How do the lights know when the train is comin?" he asked his mother. This was a new question. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Avis, stop kicking like that.' The girl continued to kick out at something imaginary in front of her and Marvella tugged at her arm until the girl stopped. 'I guess,' she said to Marvin, 'that way down the line the moving train hits something on the tracks and that tells the lights ahead to start blinking'" (On Orange Line Train to Ballston.)

"Mr. Carlson, it's obvious you cannot structure a defense for a man who does not want to be defended,' the judge assigned to the case of the District of Columbia vs. Samuel Lamont Williams said at one point to the attorney assigned to defend Samuel. That was but one of the sentences in the transcript of the trail that Madeleine Williams would come to memorize" (The Sunday Following Mother's Day.)

"It's a goddamn shame to buy the best and then have this shit sittin in the middle of all the good stuff,' Santiago said. He laughed. 'We can give this old one to the poor,' and he laughed again. His feet were propped on the edge of the coffee table, and as he laughed he stretched his legs out over the table and shook them up and down" (His Mother's House.)

"Mildred,' the woman said, 'I'm real sorry for your loss.' Two months before, the woman had turned over to Mildred's son all the belongings of Mansfield Harper, including dozens of pictures of his family. 'She didn't say nothing much, Mama,' her son kept telling Mildred. Then he said, 'She just said, 'I'm real sorry for your loss.'" (A Butterfly on F Street.)

"She was fifteen, and up until six months or so before, she would have collapsed into the chair, collapsed into a fit of crying. But now she picked up the fallen cigarette from the floor and stamped it out in the ashtray on the tiny table beside the easy chair. Her hand shook, the only reminder of the old days. 'We just talkin. We ain't doin nothin wrong,' she said quietly" (A New Man.)

"Their grandson visited less and less as he moved into his teenage years, and then, after he went away to college, in Ohio, he just called them every few weeks, on the phone they had had installed in the name of Horace and Loneese Perkins" (A Rich Man.)



"He leaned down and picked up a few of the broken albums from the floor and read the labels. 'I would not hurt you for anything in the world, Horace,' Elaine said. Okeh Phonograph Corporation. Domino Record Co. RCA Victor. Darnell, Jr.'s crying stopped, but he continued to look down at the top of Horace's head. Cameo Record Corporation, N.Y. 'You been too good to me for me to hurt you like this, Horace.' He dropped the records one at a time: "It Takes an Irishman to Make Love." "I'm Gonna Pin a Medal on the Girl I Left Behind." "Ragtime Soldier Man." "Whose Little Heart Are You Breaking Now." "The Syncopated Walk" (Marie.)



Topics for Discussion

In *The Girl Who Raised Pigeons* are the pigeons just birds? Do the symbols represent something else? What do they represent?

The First Day suggests that an illiterate mother wants her child to attend a particular school. What reasons are suggested in the narrative for the mother's selection of schools?

Cassandra, in *The Night Rhonda Ferguson Was Killed*, is nicknamed Mack Truck. Based on this nickname, how do you picture her in your mind?

The Store tells the story of the development of the narrator and protagonist as he works in a grocery store over the course of several years. What is the name of the protagonist?

In *An Orange Line Train to Ballston* a single mother finds a man attractive and wants him to initiate some type of relationship. The man does not respond. Do you think the man knew the woman wanted more than simple friendship? If so, why did he not make the next move?

The Sunday Following Mother's Day tells the story of a family destroyed by a criminal murder. If you were in a similar situation, would you react more like Samuel or more like Madeleine? Why?

In *Lost in the City* a distraught woman wants to become lost in the city. Instead, she discovers she has lived there so long that she knows every road on which she travels. Are there other possible ways of becoming 'lost' than simply not knowing where you physically are?

In *His Mother's House*, Santiago tries to give his grandmother one hundred dollars. Not only does she reject it but she states he is no longer welcome in her home. Why does she react like this?

Compare Mildred Harper, in *A Butterfly on F Street*, and Woodrow L. Cunningham, in *A New Man*. Both protagonists experience a profound personal loss within the immediate family. Do the two characters respond in a similar way? Which character seems able to recuperate from the loss more completely? Why?

Gospel presents four women who share a friendship and sing together. *A Dark Night* presents five women who pass a stormy night by gathering together. In both stories, the women are long-term acquaintances. In both stories, the principal protagonist is estranged by another woman's behavior. What other similarities exist between these two narratives?

In *Marie*, a lot of the story is conveyed by a transcription of a tape-recorded conversation. This seems fairly natural in the narrative construction. Do you think this



technique fictionally is superior to a series of extended monologues or conversations?
Why or why not?