Love Is the Crooked Thing Short Guide

Love Is the Crooked Thing by Barbara Wersba

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

In Love Is the Crooked Thing, the second volume in a trilogy about Rita Formica, the high school junior deals with a number of changes in her life. Rita, who serves as the novel's wry, love-struck narrator, pines for her much older boyfriend who is living in Zurich and learns lessons about the power of love and personal independence.

About the Author

Barbara Wersba came to be a writer after an earlier career on the stage. Born August 19,1932, in Chicago, to Robert and Lucy Jo Wersba, she was an only child who escaped loneliness by writing stories and dreaming about working the theater. The family was living in San Mateo, California, when eleven-year-old Barbara Wersba joined a community theater group. She began with backstage tasks, such as fetching coffee and running errands, but soon rose through the ranks and made her stage debut. After her parents divorced, Wersba and her mother moved to New York, where she immersed herself in Broadway theater, and spent time visiting the city's museums, bookstores, and many arts venues. While still a teenager she studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse and dance with Martha Graham.

After graduating with a degree in drama from Bard College, Wersba moved back to New York and into the usual lifestyle of an aspiring actress: sharing a Greenwich village flat with other young entertainers, making the rounds to casting agents and auditions, and picking up outside work to pay the bills, including waitressing, typing, and department store clerking. She experienced some success on the stage, acting in summer stock and touring companies, but paralyzing stage fright was a constant companion. Wersba soon reached a turning point in both her acting career and her life. With a group of friends, she started an acting company; one of their first projects was a production entitled When I Was a Child, comprised of short stories about childhood adapted for the stage. Although Wersba had been writing for years, she never considered her work publishable, but adapting these stories satisfied a creative need and paved the way for her career as an author.

Although the production toured for three months and there were even plans to take the show to Broadway, in another way the tour was disastrous. Wersba ended up seriously ill with hepatitis, and spent her recuperation at a friend's house in Martha's Vineyard. The friend suggested that she bide her time by writing a story. Through a series of events that Wersba credits to "beginner's luck," this first story, The Boy Who Loved the Sea, was published in 1961.

Over the next several years she wrote a number of brief, fanciful volumes for children. While working on an historical story, the contemporary voice of a teenage male began to echo in her mind and she put the historical manuscript away while she captured the first-person narrative of a lonely fourteen-year-old boy. She named him Albert Scully and told of his relationship with an eccentric elderly woman in The Dream Watcher.

This groundbreaking novel changed the course of Wersba's writing career. Although she continued to write an occasional volume for young readers—usually stories of dark-toned whimsy—her focus has been on young adult novels about sensitive loners searching for self-awareness and love in an often uncaring world.

Wersba considers herself a loner and spends much of her time exploring nature and caring for stray animals. She has also spent seven years running a country store with a

partner and has experienced the artistic collaboration of adapting The Dream Watcher for the stage (two early productions starred one of Wersba's childhood idols, Eva LeGallienne). She also ran her own school, The Women's Writing Workshop. Throughout, she has continued to publish young adult novels to generally positive critical response. During a lengthy professional relationship with the legendary writer and editor Charlotte Zolotow, Wersba produced Tunes for a Small Harmonica, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1977, and two trilogies, one of which includes Beautiful Losers. Overweight, love struck Rita Formica was introduced in Fat: A Love Story. Love Is the Crooked Thing continued the tale, which is concluded here in Beautiful Losers.

Setting

There are two major settings in the novel: Sag Harbor on Long Island, New York, and Zurich, Switzerland. Perhaps because Sag Harbor was already described in Fat: ALove Story, the author assumes the reader is sufficiently familiar with this location and therefore does not provide much additional information. Some of Rita's comments about her hometown in this novel are derogatory, as when she says Sag Harbor is part of the Hamptons and "it is the tackiest Hampton of them all." Later she identifies the town for a telephone operator and says, "Sag. As in his spirits sagged." In both cases, the remarks say as much about Rita's depressed state of mind as they do about the town.

This is particularly evident in the final pages of the novel; when Rita returns to Sag Harbor from overseas she marvels at "how nice" everything looks—a statement that mirrors her improved attitude. The message seems to be that a location is only as good as one's state of mind. This is reinforced by the story of Rita's employer, Doris Morris. For Doris, Sag Harbor was a trap where she ended up after her boyfriend left her. She worked in a dry cleaners "feeling sorry for myself. Drinking too much." But when she becomes an author, she moves into one of Sag Harbor's mansions, dresses fashionably, and gets written up in the local newspapers.

The main conflict in Love Is the Crooked Thing is the great distance separating Rita and Arnold, and how it can be bridged.

When Arnold disappears from Sag Harbor, Rita has no idea where he has gone. Then a series of postcards begin arriving from Europe-—first Paris, then London, then Vienna and Rome. Each card is from a different location until Arnold gets to Switzerland. Then all the cards begin to arrive from Zurich. Rita begins to obsess about Zurich, buying travel books and looking at pictures of that city.

When Rita secretly travels to Zurich for a weekend (an event that stretches out for a few days longer than anticipated), the reader sees the distance this protagonist is willing to go—both literally and figuratively—to get back with Arnold. There is a dramatic and romantic quality to the way Zurich is described in the novel. When the plane lands, Rita thinks that Zurich looks about as impressive as the Bronx but soon arrives at a railway station so impressive that she has to stop and catch her breath. After she finds Arnold they walk the streets of Zurich, stopping to admire streetcars and open air markets, visit the zoo, listen to the organ at the Fraumunster Cathedral, and eat at cafes. Yet Rita can sense that a distance has grown between Arnold and herself, and this is best typified by their visit to the Niederdorf, which is Zurich's bohemian quarter. Up until this point, everything they have seen has matched or surpassed the travel books that Rita has studied. But the Niederdorf—filled with prostitutes, alcohol and drugs—has not been featured in any of the travel books. Rita is uncomfortable in this somewhat hostile environment.

Realizing that this is a place where Arnold has visited and feels comfortable, Rita feels the sense of detachment that has occurred over the seven months they have been apart.

This is a place she has not accompanied Arnold on her travel book journeys.

Social Sensitivity

Love Is the Crooked Thing features a number of social issues that some may consider provocative and others may find troubling.

Chief among them is the physical relationship between the seventeen-year-old protagonist and her thirty-three-year-old partner. Although Rita contends that "No two people on earth were ever more right for each other" and the couple's personalities seem to mesh, the fact remains that there is a substantial age difference between them.

When Mrs. Formica threatens Arnold with statutory rape charges, it is not an outlandish accusation—particularly since the affair began when Rita was sixteen. Though Arnold is depicted as rather naive for his age and Rita shows a maturity above her years, readers may still be unsettled by Arnold's patronizing behavior ("be a good girl and listen," he admonishes at one point) during a love scene. The content of the sex scenes itself is fairly explicit, but not tawdry, and the pair is shown to be using birth control pills to avoid an unplanned pregnancy, though not practicing safe sex to avoid disease.

Another controversial issue involves Rita's plans to provide sexual intercourse to Jerry Malone in exchange for him fulfilling her book contract. Rita's superseding goal is to use the book money to track down Arnold in Europe, but her justification that "If making out... got me to Zurich, then it couldn't be wrong" may rankle readers and make them question both her morals and her allegiance to Arnold. Although the plan never reaches fruition, it is only because Jerry backs off; Rita does not seem to have too many second thoughts about the matter.

Rita's relationship with Jerry and her work for Doris Morris bring up a couple more sensitive issues. Rita, Jerry, and the other writers working for Doris Morris specialize in the thick paperback historical romance novels commonly called bodice-rippers. Most of these books begin with the heroine being raped by the hero and then falling in love with him. Rita questions the necessity of this, and her friend Corry deems it "antifeminist," but readers may still find it unnerving that, in satirizing the romance genre, this book presents the topic of rape in a fairly frivolous manner. The casual use of drugs is also shown as Jerry works on Rita's manuscript. Although Rita does not partake, she seems accepting of his marijuana smoking. Later, however, she blames his substance abuse for the poor quality of the manuscript.

Issues of body image and weight control continue to play a role in the story, though not as prominently as in the first volume of the trilogy. Junk food addict Rita has an epiphany when her therapist asks, "Don't you think you are good enough for good food?" and realizes "I ate junk food because I thought I was junk." She continues battling her weight in this book, regaining twenty of the forty pounds she has already lost—but Arnold's reaction to her weight, gain is refreshing in that he accepts her appearance and does not allow her to castigate herself for changes in her size.

Literary Qualities

The novel is narrated by Rita, who provides an intensely emotional yet often wry narrative voice. There is an intimacy about the way Rita shares her story—which includes some fairly personal details—directly with the reader, whom she often addresses in the second person; throughout the novel she says things like "you have to realize" and "if you were to ask me" and "I'm not going to bore you here with descriptions."

Although this technique inspires a closeness between character and reader, there are times when Rita's casual, conversational style depends too heavily on cliches. Phrases such as "You could have knocked me over with a feather," "the silence in the room was so tangible you could have cut it with a knife" and "a cold day in hell" draw the reader's attention as examples of lazy writing—particularly glaring because Rita is supposed to be an aspiring writer.

Barbara Wersba has employed a number of interesting literary techniques in creating this novel. Most play a minor role in the plot, such as the use of a "red herring," to shake up the story, as when Rita imagines Arnold has been spending time with an old flame in Europe, when in reality he has not seen the woman in years. Irony is on display when Doris Morris warns Rita to stay away from Jerry Malone because he is an opportunist, when in reality Rita is the opportunist in this situation. There are allusions to classic literature and film when Arnold quotes William Butler Yeats and when Rita compares herself to Lewis Carroll's Alice or discusses Wuthering Heights with her mother.

More significant literary techniques employed in the novel include satire, hyperbole, and symbolism. Satire is used in describing the. historical romances produced by Doris Morris and her firm of writers. The titles of these potboilers (Savage Thunder, Savage Encounter, Dark Savage Sky) and the names of the authors (Amanda Starcross and Charlotte Du Lac), not to mention the content of the novels themselves (in one Civil War epic, a temptress seduces Abraham Lincoln), lampoon an entire genre of modern popular literature to great effect.

And, as an added bit of humor, the description of a later love scene between Rita and Arnold contains echoes from the prose of those romantic paperbacks.

Wersba uses a bit of hyperbole in relating Rita's story. While some events may seem over the top (such as Rita's traveling to Switzerland for a weekend), it works in this novel because the characters are somewhat larger than life. Arnold's dialogue, in particular, is often affected and extravagant. Because the hyperbole is sustained throughout the novel (in fact, throughout the entire trilogy), it does not seem unusual or forced.

Symbolism is apparent in the use of swans throughout the book. We are told that when Rita and Arnold visited Otter Pond in Sag Harbor, she liked to feed the little mallards, but he preferred the swans. While he is in Switzerland, he sends Rita postcards with

photographs of swans on them. When Rita is considering having sex with Jerry in exchange for his help with her manuscript, she recalls an incident where she warned Arnold that swans "can be vicious." Finally, as she returns home to Sag Harbor she sees four swans flying over a bridge. Clearly the symbolism is suggested by the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale about the ugly duckling who becomes a swan is being evoked.

Themes and Characters

The relationship between formerly overweight high school junior Rita and her thirty-three-year-old beau Arnold Bromberg plays out against an international backdrop and explores themes of romance, abandonment, autonomy and dependence, and metamorphosis. The romantic pairing at the center of the story features two unique characters.

One of the ironies of the novel is that Arnold, who is twice as old as Rita, is actually less worldly. His background, growing up as the son of a minister in Kansas, is somewhat sheltered, and he admits to Rita's parents that his interests, which include music, literature, and philosophy, would not provide much security for a family.

When conflict arises, it is Arnold who flees the scene and moves to Europe, where he initially drifts around the Continent. Rita is a very different character. She has been overweight for most of her life, and feels "the loneliness of someone... who was always unpopular," describing her plight as a grade-schooler who cannot fit into a Halloween costume and, later, a teenager who is insulted by her first date. Rita has more of a take-charge personality than Arnold. While Arnold dabbles with writing a biography of Johann Sebastian Bach, Rita— who is also an aspiring writer—tracks down a book agent and gets a job writing a hack paperback. When Arnold spends seven months in Europe, Rita finds a way to travel halfway around the world just to spend a weekend with him. Her actions demonstrate the strength of her love for Arnold as well as illustrate the novel's theme of romance.

Abandonment is a fairly obvious theme in the novel. In addition to Arnold's abandonment of Rita when he goes overseas, there is Rita's sense of abandonment by her therapist, Mrs. Perlman, when her parents stop family therapy. The literary agent also tells a tale of abandonment by a wealthy man who lured her from the Broadway theater to Sag Harbor and then abandoned her there. At the end of this installment of the trilogy, Rita abandons Arnold in Zurich.

It is a dramatic scene, but one that again demonstrates the difference between their personalities. Rita makes it clear that she is abandoning Arnold in the physical sense only, but she has the confidence to know that he will still care for her, telling him, "I won't let you go. I'll be back there on Long Island... but I'll be with you every moment. Look me in the eye and tell me that you don't want to spend the rest of your life with me. Go on, do it!"

Those who have read the first book in the trilogy, Fat: A Love Story, have seen Rita progress from her former neediness to a new attitude of self-confidence. Metamorphosis, defined as a profound alteration in appearance or character, is a theme in the novel. The literary agent Doris Morris changed from a dry cleaning clerk to a best-selling author. Her writers change personas by publishing under pseudonyms. Jerry Malone writes hack westerns under the name "Victor Colorado" and dresses in western chic to play the part. Rita goes through several transformations in the novel. She

assumes the identity of "Amanda Starcross" in writing a paperback romance, but fails in her efforts. She tries to assume the role of a femme fatale who will have sex with Jerry Malone if he will assist her with her novel, but this plan fails as well. She goes from fat to thinner to fat again. Yet her experiences with Arnold—chasing him to Europe and then returning home alone—have matured her, and in her mind she has already transformed herself from a hack writer to someone "overwhelmed with the desire to write."

Although she has only been away from home five days, Rita can say, "I had left for Europe one kind of female, and was returning home as another. Fantastic."

Arnold's metamorphosis is perhaps not so "fantastic," as the book seems to deliver a mixed message on whether he has changed or not. Upon her arrival in Switzerland Rita notices many changes in his behavior. As she watches how easily he speaks German and handles foreign currency, Rita wonders "how he could have changed so much in seven months." Their evening trip to the Niederdorf is also revealing. Once "innocent and fey," Arnold seems assured as he consorts with the Bohemian crowd. Yet Arnold later denies that he and Rita have a future because "nothing has changed" and his unwillingness to return to the United States is a sign that he has not changed. Rita accuses him of being scared of responsibility which is, in fact, how he has always been.

It is important to mention the novel's theme of dependence and autonomy. Arnold sees himself and Rita as two sides of the same coin, and Rita's devotion to her partner is equally strong. Though the two feel dependent on one another for happiness, the journey each takes in this novel is separate. The story seems to imply that both Rita and Arnold must learn to function autonomously before they can come back together as a couple. Love Is the CrookedThing is an unusual romance in that the couple does not come together at the end of the book—despite the fact that Rita has traveled thousands of miles to be with Arnold, despite Rita's marriage proposal, and her assertion that she will always wait for her lover. Love is indeed a "crooked thing" in this story, with unexpected twists.

Midway through the book Rita has a realization that women seek out certain movies and books because they offer something the women do not have... yet Rita cannot quite figure out "What was it everyone wanted, then?" Later in Switzerland she realizes "Valued was the word I was looking for that night. . . . Women wanted to be valued."

Arnold tells Rita he values her, but does that account for her optimistic attitude as she travels home alone? Perhaps, but it may also stem from the idea that Rita is learning to value herself as well.

Topics for Discussion

1. If you have read the other two books in this trilogy, does this—the second volume—fulfill its purpose? If you have not read the other two novels, what do you imagine Rita's story to be like before and after the events in this book?

2. Who is most concerned about Rita's weight in this book?

3. Do the two books Rita is writing— Rosamunde and Savage Sunset—reflect her own romantic dilemmas in any way?

4. Is Doris Morris's story about Everett Emberley important to the plot? Does it add to the characterizations in the novel?

5. Do Corry's actions make her a good friend to Rita?

6. Are Jerry Malone's motivations for helping Rita believable?

7. Is Rita's behavior consistent with that of a typical high school junior? Does she seem more mature or less mature than most teenagers her age?

8. Are Rita's parents sympathetically portrayed?

9. What are the ethical implications of Rita's agreement with Jerry? Is it possible to truly love one person wholeheartedly yet be physically involved with another?

10. Rita finds herself repeating the phrase "Life is a labyrinth" after hearing Jerry say it. What does it mean and why does she say it?

11. Compare and contrast Rita's two flights as she travels to and from Switzerland.

12. The novel ends with a reference to Wuthering Heights. Is this significant?

If so, why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Seventeen-year-old Rita expects to have her romance novel published. Several real life teenagers have published books.

What kind of books have they written and have they been successful?

2. Arnold communicates with Rita through a series of postcards. Describe, or create through color copies, a series of postcards that would inform others where you are in your life at this time—geograpically and emotionally.

3. Doris Morris is in charge of a "stable" of writers churning out romances, westerns, and mysteries. Is this a common practice in book publishing? How does it apply to the world of young adult literature?

4. Is Zurich portrayed realistically in the novel? How does Switzerland compare to the United States politically, economically and culturally?

5. What is the meaning of the Yeats poem that Arnold recites to Rita? What other works by Yeats would describe their relationship?

6. Is Rita's overseas trip realistically depicted? What plans would an underage traveler have to make in order to go overseas?

7. What are the moral and legal ramifications of a romance between a seventeen-year-old high school student and a thirty-three-year-old man?

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186-96. Much of this autobiographical essay was originally printed in the Something About the Author Autobiography Series, but it does include additional upto-date information on Wersba's life and career.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers will be interested in the two other books in this trilogy. Fat: A Love Story introduces Rita, describes her crush on an unattainable man named Robert Swann, and depicts the developing relationship between Arnold Bromberg and Rita. Arnold and Rita are reunited in the final book, Beautiful Losers. Barbara Wersba has written another trilogy about a character who, like Rita, feels like a misfit and gradually learns to accept herself and find love; Heidi Rosenbloom is featured in the three volumes Just Be Gorgeous, Wonderful Me, and The Farewell Kid. Authors frequently set their stories in the same places, and it is interesting to compare and contrast these books. Wersba has placed another story, Whistle Me Home, in Sag Harbor, and sends another protagonist to Switzerland in You'll Never Guess the End. And for a different look at a May-December romance—this time presented from the point of view of a young male—Wersba's The Country of the Heart is a sad, romantic novel.

A much more reserved, but even more touching, story of a teenage girl's love for an older man can by found in The Giver by Lynn Hall. Taking It by Michael Cadnum provides a very different portrayal of how a young woman's interest in an older man can change her life.

There are many young adult books that deal with issues of body image and weight.

Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack! by M. E. Kerr is a modern classic that contains laugh out loud humor and stunning moments of truth.

Sarah Dessen's Keeping the Moon tells the story of a teenage girl whose life changes when she loses a significant amount of weight.

Another book about a teenage writer working on a romance novel is My Angelica by Carol Lynch Williams, a novel which also satirizes the genre of romance writing.

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