Loving Women: A Novel of the Fifties Short Guide

Loving Women: A Novel of the Fifties by Pete Hamill

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Characters

The young hero is the central character—Michael, a "wiseass" who does not know how to drive a car. Besides his intelligence, wit, courage, and genuine good nature, his great gift is his ability to encounter and respect that which is new or unknown, even when at closer inspection it must remain the Other, like the Southern culture he meets in Pensacola: "That was another thing I learned: I wasn't one of them, maybe never could be one of them, because the things that were deep in me didn't exist for them, and the things that were deep in the southerners didn't mean anything to me. I could be quiet, that was all. I could respect them.

But I couldn't truly feel what they felt."

This quality, along with his courage and fighting prowess—he is trained as a boxer—is what draws Eden, Bobby, and the others to him, even when they see his naivete. "I am a boy," he says, "trying to make sense of the world and of women, and of love. I am feeling again the sense of shame and forgiveness, separation and reconciliation. I am learning to walk."

Michael learns about love and work during this period, setting his feet on the path that would lead from drawing to photography, a mission to capture the moment in a context which gives meaning.

But although the American Dream would seem to promise unlimited opportunity, the lives of Michael and his Brooklyn friends are already circumscribed by their origins. Brooklyn boys are all fighters, boxers. None finish high school, and college is a dim horizon.

Even though he is the company intellectual, knows Latin, and loves the classics, Sal attributes his wildness to the fact that all Italian guys have to look forward to is the Sanitation Department: "I was the top student in my class, but the Irish priests and nuns never encouraged me to do anything more. I was some kind of freak to them." Michael is given a way out by his friend Miles Rayfield, an artist and intellectual who pursues his path alone. Miles is different from Michael and his friends—a Southerner, even though an outsider in his own culture, he hates baseball and doesn't know popular songs.

Miles, however, acts as Michael's mentor into the world of art—"real art," Michael says, not cartoons—and a way of seeing and talking that would open doors for Michael: "I'd never heard anyone talk like this, with all the sentences perfectly formed, and words rolling around in a rich crazy obscene way. Miles had a southern accent, too, a softness in the vowels that made the consonants sound even harder when he started firing his sentences like bullets."

Michael's other great teacher during this period, Bobby Bolden, introduces Michael not to the world of the intellect and abstraction, as Miles does, but the world of hidden emotion and passion—music, heroic feeling, and a sense of oneself in opposition to the

established order. Bobby's saxophone sets the tone for Michael's stay at Ellyson—"He was playing the blues. A slow, mournful tune, . . . Sounding as lonesome as I was.

Like a broken heart, or hunger, or jail."

As a black man from the North, Bobby is an outsider too, "a bad ass, a war hero, a prick, and a whoremaster. But he sure can play the saxophone, can't he?" Bobby, already decorated in Korea for his heroic exploits as a medical corpsman, recognizes Michael's bravery and adventurousness when Michael offers him a lift back to the base, something whites are not allowed to do for blacks, and brings Michael briefly into his own world. And although Michael has other teachers, the Navy lifers who show him what suffering and hardship can do to people, it is Bobby's fall which forms his adult perception of his society. When Bobby and his white girlfriend, Catty, are betrayed and beaten, Michael's opposition to the culture which produced segregation and the Ku Klux Klan is set indelibly.

Bobby's female counterpart and Michael's most influential teacher, though, is Eden Santana. A light-skinned Creole from New Orleans, Eden brings the promise of a part of America where racial division is less stark, the possibility of harmony more apparent. Like Michael, she is a searcher and adventurer, on a quest for her own life despite a past marked by the limitations of race, sex, and plain bad breaks. Married very young to a sadistic womanizer who abandons and brutalizes her, Eden is the mother of two daughters left behind in New Orleans as she seeks a life free of her terrorizing husband. Although her own life is a frugal, difficult one, working at Sears and looking for food bargains from which to create her delicious meals, Eden has a rich inner life, a risk-taking adventurous spirit, and an intuitive wisdom she offers to Michael. More than ten years Michael's senior (she calls him "child"), Eden clearly carries the key to a hidden world of feeling and emotional life, she is in many ways a female version of Michael himself—strangely childlike and innocent, instinctively courageous and knowing, and thus both his mentor and partner.

Women, limited more than men perhaps by their gender and environment—shop girls, whores, or housewives—have the inner intensity to overcome their situation and forge their lives, as does Dixie Walker, the three hundred pound owner of Dixie's Dirt Bar, who takes Michael's virginity and tells her own story of her escape from her poverty-filled hollow and her initiation into sexual and political adulthood in the labor struggles in Harlan County's coal fields.

Social Concerns

This novel of a young man's encounter with manhood and the culture of the Cold War 1950s is played out against the backdrop of the Korean Conflict experienced by a group of sailors sitting it out stateside in a Navy supply dump in Pensacola, Florida. Michael Devlin's journey from the Brooklyn of his childhood into the South exposes him to the American "other" which lies outside the urban, ethnic neighborhoods of his boyhood. Michael wants to know what America is, or what it has become beyond the images offered up by the popular media or the movies: Sometimes I think about America (after looking at Life or The Saturday Evening Post) and it's like a foreign country. I never went to any of these American things: sock hops, drive-in movies, homecoming games, pajama parties . . . I used to look at Archie comics like they were science fiction.

Both military life and life in the South bring him into contact with the unregenerate parts of the adult world, its regimentation, intolerance, lack of emotional and intellectual opportunity and, most importantly, the racial divisions and violence which become a metaphor for the underside of the America psyche.

Although the novel is not really about the military or even about the Cold WarKorean Conflict, the dark, paranoid aura created by these elements colors Michael's experience of the American Dream. Unlike the more idealistic decade before it, with the Good War and the promise of a free and happy future, the 1950s, like the 1980s, was a decade in which happy faces and smooth surfaces —Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan— hid growing divisions within the culture, a moral hollowness reflected by a loss of personal and national purpose, and a pervasive aura of fear and violence.

The first national figure Michael, already feeling out of place in the 1980s, thinks of as he waits in the cafe is Bernie Goetz, the subway vigilante who shot up a group of threatening black youths.

The 1950s narrative is staged against a 1980s background, as the middle-aged Michael, a successful but burned-out photojournalist, reminisces about 1953 during a dinner marking his passage through middle age, and probably to the end of another marriage. These two rather jaded eras are brought together by the juxtaposition of his present self and the "sweet and serious boy I used to be" as embodied in the pages of the Blue Notebook he kept as a seventeen-year old "kid in the Navy." The young Michael's bus trip south from Brooklyn begins his odyssey into the American unknown, personified by the other enlistees and the denizens of Pensacola. In addition to the urban ethnic types familiar from his Brooklyn surroundings, one of the poor Irish of Seventh Avenue, young men like Italian Sal and Jewish Max, are Southerners, Midwesterners, Navy lifers, more blacks than he has seen in any one place before, and the locals—camps followers and resentful rednecks. When the black passengers on the bus are moved to the rear when they cross the Mason-Dixon line, Michael meets the segregated South and the tragic figure of Bobbie Belden, the saxophoneplaying Korean war hero whose destruction comes to personify the waste and tragedy of that racial hatred. Michael learns of the strict rules which keep blacks and whites separate and the

price paid for violating those rules, especially the ones which separate black men from white women, when Bobby and his white girl friend are severely beaten by the local Klan, in an attack so violent as to leave Bobby crippled forever; the event is not even reported by the local paper. Violence and confrontation are everyday elements in the real world of the base, as Michael and his friends fight their officers, the lifers, one another—the Marines—and the local vigilantes, who come after them almost as easily as they do the blacks.

Strict rules of conformity govern other areas of life as well. Michael, an aspiring artist, learns that art is something that must be hidden behind the crates—as his friend Miles Redfield does with his paintings—unless it can be turned to some more easily governed practical purpose, like the portraits of people's girlfriends Michael draws from photographs for extra money. Affection and friendship between the men themselves is strictly monitored to avoid any suggestion of homosexuality. To violate this most unmentionable taboo means shame and ostracism to the point of suicide, the route Miles takes when one of his liaisons is discovered.

Relationships between men and women, too, are regulated by strict rules dictating narrowly prescribed roles in their contact with one another. Women are either the sweethearts back home (by now is going or gone) or the whores in the bars surrounding the base. Women as whole human beings are unknown to boys like Michael, and crossing that chasm provides the focus of Michael's initiation, his relationship with Eden Santana. Eden teaches him the complexity and mystery of human relationships and the difficulty of ever really knowing another person in a culture which so strictly prescribes separateness. Not only do Michael and Eden violate strict roles in their sexual relations, in which Eden is often the initiator and in which gender identity is often blurred, but they also violate an even stricter taboo, that of blending the races, a painful lesson for Michael to finally learn.

Michael's discovery that Eden is actually black—has in fact been "passing for white"—brings the two of them face to face with miscegenation. Like homosexuality, it is a cardinal violation during the decade of the 1950s, and their transgression places Michael and Eden squarely in opposition of the most deeply held social code of their time. Because miscegenation is the ultimate non-conformity, it exacts the most violent of mob punishment, as in the case of Bobby Belden and his white girlfriend.

Techniques

Hamill maintains in the epilogue to Loving Women that, although he himself was stationed at Ellyson Field in 19521953, the characters and events are imaginary, a photojournalistic realism—a backdrop of popular and political culture of the times, and a narrative of colorful characters and dramatic, newsworthy events (the "grabbers" Hamill the editor says that every day's newspaper ought to have) are the most apparent techniques of the novel. Framed within a middleaged Michael's reminiscence, the young Michael's odyssey is interspersed with the tools of the journalist's trade, his own notebooks from the time, recording his thought and discoveries—dictionary definitions ("journey," "segregate"), biographical profiles of the people he meets, their own stories (Red Cannon, Dixie, Sale, and Eden herself), his own reflections, and his not-very-informative letters home. The Korean War events in the stories of Bobby Bolden and Red Cannon are set against the history opitimized in the story of Eden's plantation forebears. National and international politics are there—Mc Carthy, the death of Stalin—sports, the movies (Michael does not understand James Dean), and always music—not just cool, knowing music of jazz and the blues, but corny, naive popular music as well—both Champion Jack Dupree and Jo Stafford. Graphic, explicit descriptions of sex and violence are the landscape through which Michael's education progresses.

The motif of the journey, the road, first to the prisonlike microcosm of Ellyson Field (the River Styx runs through it), with its authorities, its segregation, and its brutality, and then to the temporary liberation of New Orleans, where Michael and Eden meet, free for the moment from external exigencies which will thereafter keep them forever apart. New York and New Orleans are in some ways the same—Michael notices that New Orleanians speak Brooklynese!—in that they are multiethnic cities, set apart from their surrounding territory, places where people go to disappear or to find themselves.

New Orleans is the antithesis of Pensacola, with its rigid divisions, a feminine world as opposed to the masculine. Michael says that it "reached out and hugged him" as he loses himself in the maze of the French Quarter, and discovers the world (the Cafe du Monde, with beignets and chicory coffee) and Eden too. After a final ecstatic reunion in the Royal Orleans hotel, they part forever, leaving Michael to return to the real world of the base. The older Michael, recreating his younger, more freely feeling self in his memory, emerges "no longer old."

The picaresque tradition, here juxtaposed with the classic initiation odyssey, provides an imaginative counterpoint to Hamill's pictorially realistic narrative in his use of evocative allusions. Eden's is the primeval innocence and fall from Grace that drove Adam and Eve from paradise into a world of coercion, division, and danger. The novel's Ellyson Field parallels the mythological Elysian Fields, just across the Rive Styx from Eden's trailer, Bobby Belden and Catherine's forbidden hideaway, and Dixie's Dirt Bar. New Orleans, of course, is the promised land where Eden and Michael find a moment of fulfillment. The roads that connect these new and challenging territories to the site of Michael's childhood naivete for a web around which the narrative is constructed.

Themes

The great concern of the bildungsroman is the young man's education and how it changes him: "Thus began the time of my education. Miles Rayfield taught me the secrets of drawing. Bobby Bolden taught me about music. And Eden Santana taught me about everything else." As in Hamill's other works, the main lesson which must be learned is to take part in the human attempt to overcome the barriers which separate one human or group from others. These barriers are most apparent when they appear as divisions between race, religion, and ethnicity, made most apparent here as Michael learns about Southern culture—Hank Williams' death a few days after he arrives on base opens up a new world of popular art and feeling—and most importantly, about black people, as he becomes the only white boy to enter the separate world of black music (jazz and blues), food, and eroticism, and worldly wisdom with Bobby Bolden and his friends in the mess shack. As Michael is initiated into their idiom and special knowledge, he develops a view of the dominant culture from below which will set him apart forever from the other whites, a perspective which is a source of both strength and further isolation. Lonesomeness, embodied in the myth and the music of Hank Williams, is the human condition in this world, either within one's own group and separate from others, or caught between two groups, and accepted in neither, as Michael learns when he tries to return to his new black friends after the downfall of Bobby Bolden.

But whatever the differences between these blacks and whites may be, they are still men. Perhaps the greatest distance in the novel is that between men and women, and since discovering his own manhood and the unknown territory of womanhood is Michael's most immediately felt need, sex and sexuality become the major activity of the novel—that, and fighting. Once Michael manages to relocate Eden Santana, whom he met briefly on that bus to Pensacola, she teaches him not only how to drive, the lack of which skill has been a matter of surprise to everyone, but also to his own depths of feeling, both sexual and emotional, his own ability to meet another person's needs, and the capacity of others to be always a little bit hidden, essentially mysterious and surprising. There is straightforward sex of all varieties, and there are the Games, sexual risk taking which includes flashing trains, extreme role play ing, and multiple partners. Many of the Games involve erotic versions of religious ritual, since escaping the rigid bonds of sexual conformity is a metaphor for escaping other traditional bondage—in sexuality, "I was negating my own past, my Catholicism, my enforced subservience to a tyrannical code that was not of my own invention. Embracing sin, I ceased being a Catholic."

The major quest in Hamill's work is that familiar to the 1950s, the desire to rise above the mediocre, the ordinary, and live entirely in the realm of feeling and spontaneity, unfettered by rules.

Breaking the bonds of traditional notions of masculinity, however, proves a little bit harder. Michael is disturbed by his growing awareness that Miles Redfield may be gay, and he is outraged by Eden's suggestion that everyone has some of the opposite sex in their makeup: "Child, you better learn quick that human beings are complicated. You

hear me . . . Nobody's all one thing." Miles had taught Michael about art and a wider intellectual world, but was himself unable to bear the loss of both his art, when his paintings and sketches are discovered behind some crates, and his reputation, when some of the drawings contain incriminating sketches of other men. The image of male bonding is whole and compassionate when Michael recalls how he "sat down beside him; and put an arm around him and pulled him close and hugged him a long time" before his suicide.

For although our attempts to break out of our isolation and approach the "Other" bring ecstasy when they succeed, ultimately everything is transitory, even emotional connection and the presence of others. The dominant low note in the novel is that of loss—old friends and lovers, and our sense of what being with them was like. Death, of course, is always present, and forced separation, but social norms which divide are still strong. After their ecstatic encounter in New Orleans, a city free of the racial divides which govern the rest of the country, Michael and Eden are lost to each other, as are all the others from this time, even the New York boys like Sal and Max. To Michael, Hank Williams embodies that sense of tragic loss, as does the history of our century in his time. Williams' death "was like the day Roosevelt died, . . . later, when Jack Kennedy was killed and Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X and John Lennon, all the great killings of my time." Because to be constantly immersed in loss produces numbness, "professionally numb," Michael thinks; the young self, with all its feeling and poignancy, must be resurrected.

Key Questions

Loving Women, with its photojournalistic view of the early fifties, is interesting for a group interested in history. The interweaving of Michael's notebook and narrative with the older Michael's midlife questioning raises questions of technique.

It is an action-packed adventure which would be attractive for younger readers, although the graphic sexual encounters would seem to require a more mature audience.

1. How does the South and military life differ from Michael's old life in New York? How does the setting reflect this difference?

2. Hamill's picture of military life is gripping and realistic. What do the "lifers" like Turner and Red Cannon teach Michael, and what are some of the military types he meets?

3. Race relations are a dominant theme of the book. How do blacks and whites view each other? How does Michael view the power structure which enforces segregation? What is Hamill suggesting about the future of these relations?

4. How does Bobby Bolden stand out as a mythic figure in the novel? In what ways does he seem stereotypical? In what ways unusual?

5. Eden Santana teaches Michael a lot about being human, not just about being a man. What are some of those things?

6. How does Eden Santana's background and the fact that she is "passing for white" affect her relationship with Michael and the main themes of the novel? What does the historical section about her family contribute? How does her relationship with James Robinson affect who she is?

7. Hamill's depiction of women has been criticized as one-dimensional and exploitative. Do you agree?

8. Miles Rayfield is a major influence on Michael's intellectual and artistic development. What does he teach Michael about human nature? How does his sexual identity impact on Michael's sense of his own identity?

9. Many different kinds of music are mentioned in the novel, and music is associated with different places and people. If you know about some of these types of music and musicians, explain how they add a special meaning.

9. Ellyson Field, the River Styx, Florida, New Orleans—these settings all have special meaning, especially compared with Michael's native New York. How are they portrayed both realistically and symbolically?

10. Pick some of Michael's definitions, notes to himself, or letters home, and explain how it depicts his inner changes.

11. What gift does the younger Michael give his older self?

Literary Precedents

Stories of the young man's journey to manhood are a staple of American literature, especially in the mid-twentieth century, with Hemingway, Fitzgerald (whom Michael likes, even though he doesn't understand people like that), and in the 1950s, especially in the rebellious coming of age accounts of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and the poetry of Allen Ginsberg. War, as well, is an initiation, as in the novels of Norman Mailer and James Jones. The idea of "passing for white," as Eden Santana does, was actually a popular fiction and film motif of the era.

Related Titles

This Michael Devlin, who recalls learning all he knows about Jews when he was the shabbos goy for the "old rabbi on 14th Street," is clearly the same Michael whose boyhood self Hamill created later in Snow in August (1997; see separate entry). Although the rowdy, lusty Michael of Loving Women seems different from the dreamy lad whose purity wins the day, they have the same intellectual curiosity and emotional bravery. Their backgrounds are the same, although this Michael's illiterate, somewhat narrow-minded father is a far cry from Tommy Devlin, in more ways than being alive, his mother is not Irish Kate, but a "ladderback" from the Bronx, and he has siblings.

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