

# **A Mixture of Frailties Short Guide**

## **A Mixture of Frailties by Robertson Davies**

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">A Mixture of Frailties Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>



# Characters

Monica Gall is the main character of *A Mixture of Frailties*. Music is an essential part of Monica's life, almost like a sixth sense: "I hear music all the time.

. . . The music is always at the back of my mind. It's not particularly original, but on the other hand it isn't anybody else's. It is just that I feel in terms of music. And when I can be quiet enough to get at what's going on in my mind, the music is what gives me the clue." When as a small child, Monica had told her mother about the music, Ma Gall told her that it was a bad habit that she must break herself of lest it drive her crazy. Because of Mrs. Bridgetower's bequest, Monica receives the opportunity to cultivate this extra sense so that it becomes a means of expression rather than a mental defect.

Before performing Monica displays mood shifts that seem uncharacteristic given her reasonable nature elsewhere.

She becomes depressed and feels unworthy as public performance approaches. Monica comes to recognize these feelings as part of her heritage from her mother whose life had been marked by alternating bouts of depression and exhilaration that she had little control over. When Ma Gall first appears in the novel, she seems grotesque. In her depressed state, which was most of the time, "she was morose, untidy and rather dirty in her dress, never took her hair out of curlers, wore her teeth only at meals and — the girls [i.e., Monica and Alice] knew this but did not speak of it even to each other — did not wash very often." These long bouts of depression would be interrupted by brief surges of energy in which major feasts would be prepared and served. What Monica discovers once she is separated from her mother is that there are traces of Ada Gall's personality in herself. It pops out unexpectedly, for example, when she is looking at Persis Kinwellmarshe, Giles's slovenly bed mate: "She's got a butt-end on her like a bumble-bee, said the voice of Ma Gall, very clearly, inside Monica's head." Monica comes to realize that both the depression she feels before performance and the imaginative wit she surprises herself with are Ma Gall's legacy to her.

Some of Ma Gall's uneven mood swings are also found in Giles Revelstoke, the composer and teacher that Monica falls in love with. For a time, Monica brings order into Giles's world, cleaning up his apartment and providing funds to produce his opera *The Golden Asse*, but Giles's success with the opera becomes a path to destruction as he gives way to a series of increasingly paranoid acts. He insists on leading a disastrous performance of the opera at Venice, replacing Sir Benedict Domdaniel on the podium without an orchestra rehearsal and attempting to restore his score to its original, unedited state. Then he turns on Domdaniel and Monica, accusing them both of tampering with his score and profiting from his genius. After his suicide, five different people feel responsible for Giles's death. This response perhaps gives an indication of the manipulative mind games that he was used to playing. Giles's weakness is best suggested by Murtagh Molloy before a memorial concert of Giles's music, when Molloy explains that Giles was not the best interpreter of his own music because he lacked the discipline of the performing artist: "But as a performer, he [i.e., Giles] was an amachoor,



and I don't just mean inexperienced; I mean he was the prey of all kind o' silly ideas; he couldn't concentrate on the job — not in the right way. Genius — yes: discipline — not an idea of it. Now you're [i.e., Monica] a professional.

You've got standards he didn't know about and I've given you training he never had. So keep hold of yourself; you and the music are the important things for the next couple of hours."

At this point late in the novel, Monica has learned how to concentrate, focus, and perform, skills that were missing for both Giles and her mother.

The great exemplar of these skills is Sir Benedict Domdaniel, the celebrated conductor. Sir Benedict is the only important character who is not at times the object of Davies's satire. Sir Benedict is described as a bit of a fussy dandy, but these personal qualities are offset by his words of wisdom to Monica and her growing admiration for his artistry. When Sir Benedict first interviews her in London, he suggests that she try to become a "sexual singer," someone whose voice is like a "mountain torrent" and for whom the instrument takes precedence over the music she sings; later after she has sung a minor part in Bach's St. Matthew Passion at her first public performance in England, he tells her that when he performs Bach, he always feels that the composer himself is listening. As an interpretive artist, his aim is to please the composer, and this makes him humble. Domdaniel's remarks may seem contradictory, but they are appropriately aimed at two different points in Monica's development as an artist.

The arrogance of the "sexual singer" and the humility of the novice singing a minor part in one of Bach's greatest works are both qualities that Monica needs if she is to be a performing artist. Domdaniel's talent as an advisor is that he knows what to say to Monica at a particular point in her career.

At the end of the novel, Monica has returned to Salterton and she is singing in the cathedral on the occasion of the fourth and final (since Solomon and Veronica Bridgetower have produced a male heir) Bridgetower Memorial Sermon. As the service and the sermon proceed, she is reviewing a letter in which Domdaniel proposes to her. At the end of the service, she has reached her decision which has been arrived at by a combination of good sense, feeling, intuition, and spiritual guidance.

## Social Concerns

A Mixture of Frailties takes place in Canada and England during the 1950s. Davies tells the story of a young woman from Salterton, a small city in Ontario, who receives a scholarship to study singing in London. The novel turns on the differences between the provincial world of Salterton and the cosmopolitan world of London.

Monica Gall comes from a lowly background. Her parents are Thirteeners, members of the fundamentalist Thirteenth Apostle Tabernacle. Her father is a union man who has worked all his life at the Glue Works. Monica has a strong sense of family loyalty and has never questioned her parents' beliefs or their position in society, unlike her sister Alice who marries a bank employee and joins the United Church of Canada. Monica has a talent: She can sing, and as a member of the Heart and Hope Gospel Quartet from the Thirteenth Apostle Tabernacle, she is heard five mornings a week on local radio. Her voice has been noticed by Humphrey Cobbler, the organist of the Anglican cathedral in Salterton. When Louisa Hansen Bridgetower dies and establishes a scholarship for a twentyone-year-old female artist from Salterton to study abroad until Mrs. Bridgetower's son produces a male heir, there are not many candidates who meet all the requirements for this award (one is disqualified because she is no longer a virgin). Cobbler brings Monica Gall's name to the attention of the committee, and she receives the scholarship by default.

Thus, Monica Gall, who had only daydreamed about a life in the arts, is transported from Salterton to London where she becomes involved with the serious (and not so serious) musicians, artists, and writers involved in the production of a publication devoted to criticism of the arts called The Lantern.

Most of these people are in one way or another in rebellion against the Victorian values of a city like Salterton. As artists, some of them may be frauds, i.e., they may know nothing about art or they may lack talent, but they all enjoy a freedom of choice and expression that is not possible in Salterton.

# Techniques

*A Mixture of Frailties* is Davies's third novel. The story of Mrs. Bridgetower's bequest provides the frame for Monica Gall's story, which is a *Kunstlerroman*, a novel about the development of an artist. A number of characters, most notably Solomon and Veronica Bridgetower, play relatively small roles in the story of Monica Gall, but Davies depends on the reader's familiarity with and interest in these characters from the two earlier Salterton novels. Thus, they have the weight of major characters even though they appear only briefly in the novel. It would be an irrelevancy for a reader to learn that Monica Gall becomes good friends with the Bridgetowers if the reader were not already familiar with them and had a greater sense of their humanity than he gains in *A Mixture of Frailties*.

Davies's characterizations are in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century English novelists. Minor figures are identified by one or two outstanding characteristics as well as by their position in society. For example, here is Monica's South Kensington landlady, Mrs. Merry, in a sentence: "She seemed to be rather grand, for she spoke in a refined manner, making a diphthong of every vowel, and she wore a look of suffering bravely borne which was, in Monica's eyes, distinguished." A page later a reader may place Mrs. Merry with a whole class of "very refined ladies" who run Chelsea restaurants and who give "out an atmosphere of highbred grievance." Mrs. Merry becomes the object of humor when she is invited to Sir Benedict Domdaniel's house for a late night party as a form of appeasement for a rowdy gathering that had been going on in Monica's rooms on the occasion of a radio broadcast of the premiere of one of Giles Revelstoke's pieces. Mrs. Merry becomes inebriated and eventually passes out.

In the characterizations of some of the secondary characters, there may be unexpected shifts in tone. Monica's mother starts out as a kind of grotesque, but after her death, Monica reconsiders their relationship and Ma Gall takes on noble qualities that had been missing in life. Murtagh Molloy, Monica's singing teacher, is eccentric and at first appears to be harmless. The unwary reader may be surprised to discover him late in the novel attacking Monica at a fancy-dress ball, and to observe Monica coolly thinking to herself, "So this is rape." These shifts in tone reflect Monica's changing values and sensibility. Ma Gall on her death bed is essentially the same Ma Gall who appears earlier in the novel, but Monica's understanding of her has changed. If Monica's response to Molloy's attack appears strange, it may in part be a reflection of her knowledge of the attacker.



# Themes

The main theme in this novel is Monica Gall's development as a performing artist. In Salterton, Monica has not known many people in the arts.

Her main influence has been her Aunt Ellen, organist at a small Baptist church for over twenty-five years.

Aunt Ellen and Monica listen to the Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera, look at pictures of the great singers of the turn of the century in *The Victor Book of the Opera*, and read sentimental fiction like Jessie Fothergill's *The First Violin*, which is about a young woman with a beautiful voice whose singing teacher is "daemonic" and whose lover (a violinist in an orchestra) turns out to be a nobleman in the end. When Monica receives the scholarship, Aunt Ellen tells her to become "a great artist," someone who is always "simple and fine" and loves everything that is "sweet in life." This definition reflects Aunt Ellen's life, for Aunt Ellen is simple, sweet, and fine, but it has little to do with being an artist. It is soon destroyed by Sir Benedict Domdaniel, the conductor who becomes Monica's mentor in London.

Monica tells Domdaniel that she wants to be an artist because "it makes you a fine person and you can help other people" by enriching their lives and making them better. Domdaniel scoffs at this notion of refinement. He tells her that being refined means being "predictable, stable, controlled, always choosing the smallest cake on the plate, never breaking wind audibly, being a good loser — in a word, dead." Domdaniel divides the world into two parties: "the people who are for life, and the people who are against it," the followers of Eros and Thanatos respectively. According to Domdaniel, Monica has been raised in the halls of Thanatos; she is "all buttoned up, vocally and spiritually." He thinks that Monica's training will show whether she may really belong to the Eros party. In what follows, Davies slights the technical aspect of Monica's training and concentrates on the encounters that make her a follower of Eros.

Her two main teachers are Murtagh Molloy, who teaches her voice and interpretation, and Giles Revelstoke, a composer who teaches her about the music she performs. At her first lessons with both men, they ask her to sing Tosti's "Good-Bye!" After her rendition, Molloy demonstrates how the song should be sung, and Monica is startled by the intensity of his performance. Molloy tells her that he focuses on the mood of a piece, not on individual expressive effects of phrasing.

Revelstoke's approach to the song is more literary. He analyzes the text of the poem and the way the composer has set it. By the time he is finished, "Good-Bye!" is not simply a sentimental parlor song about parting. In "a hundred or so bars of music," WhyteMelville (the poet) and Tosti have captured the anguish of impotence, which is seen as a problem of advancing age, "an intimation of mortality."

Revelstoke's sessions are intended to make Monica think about the music she performs, but not necessarily in an analytical way. As he explains at a later lesson, he is



not educating Monica in a conventional way: "Formal education" makes "critics, not artists. Its usual effect is to cage the spirit in other people's ideas — the ideas of poets and philosophers, which were once splendid insights into the nature of life, but which people who have no insights of their own have hardened into dogma. It is the spirit we must work with, and not the mind as such."

In this novel, Monica's spirit grows and deepens. At the beginning, she is filled with ideas and expectations that she has learned from people in Salterton. During the novel, these are supplanted by what she learns from people like Revelstoke, Molloy, and Domdaniel. At times, she seems to be replacing one set of conventional truisms with another set, for Monica is good at parroting what her teachers say. However, by the end of the novel, Monica has evolved as a credible performing artist.

Monica grows both morally and spiritually. At times she commits acts which her family would consider to be immoral. Thus, she becomes the lover of Giles Revelstoke, going against the moral teachings of her faith. She adds to the sin by giving Giles money from the Bridgetower Trust to support his composing. Giles at this point makes Monica's situation harder by boasting that she is keeping him. However, Monica learns that there is a difference between the appearance of immorality and the actual thing. Her motives for using the money to support Giles are good; her love for him is genuine.

When her dying mother asks Monica if she is "a good girl," Monica knows that by her parents' standards she has sinned, but she can answer in the affirmative because she has learned that "chastity is to have the body in the soul's keeping." By that standard, she is chaste.

More troubling is the role that Monica plays in the deaths of her mother and of her lover. When Monica returns to Salterton after several years' study in London, she is told that her mother needs a gallbladder operation or she will die. Her response to Dr. Cobbett may seem too pat and convenient: "If I kill the spirit by delivering her, frightened and forsaken, into your hands, what makes you think that you can save the flesh?" However, Monica has achieved a double perspective here: She understands what Dr. Cobbett is offering her mother; she also knows how her mother feels because she has grown up in this household and knows what it means to hold her mother's beliefs.

In the death of Giles, Monica is less culpable, but feels more guilt. After much provocation in Venice, she separates from Giles and writes him a letter explaining why she is breaking off.

When she returns to London, she has a change of heart and goes to Giles's flat to be reconciled with him, only to discover his body in a gas-filled room.

He looks dead to Monica (his skin was dark), and he has her letter in one hand and a negative review in the other. Monica thinks clearly enough to know that she does not want to be implicated in Giles's death, so she retrieves the letter from Giles's hand and turns the gas back on so that the flat will look undisturbed when his body is discovered. At the coroner's inquest, Monica learns that Giles did not die from the gas but





suffocated on his own vomit; she thinks that she might have been able to save him had she acted differently. Monica is more troubled by the role she played in Giles's death than in her mother's, even though she acted in good faith, never for a moment suspecting that Giles might still be alive. She confesses her crime to Sir Benedict Domdaniel who soothes her by pointing out that Giles was manipulative and had probably turned on the gas expecting to be saved by a penitent Monica. He gambled, and he lost.

The title of this novel comes from Halifax: "Nothing softeneth the Arrogance of our Nature like a Mixture of some Frailties. It is by them that we are best told, that we must not strike too hard upon others because we ourselves do so often deserve blows. They pull our Rage by the sleeve and whisper Gentleness to us in our censures."

Surely this quotation applies to Monica in the above episodes. Halifax is admonishing his readers not to be too critical of others lest they be judged by the same standards they so recklessly apply. In the case of Monica, the greater wisdom comes when she learns to apply the same "gentleness" not only to her censures of others but to herself.

## Key Questions

A Mixture of Frailties is often called a transitional novel in Davies's oeuvre. It appeared in 1958; Davies's next novel would be published twelve years later.

In the interim, Davies would be busy with academic administrative duties as the first Master of Massey College in the University of Toronto. A Mixture of Frailties is in the style of the first two novels in the Salterton trilogy. There is little experimentation with point of view; there are a number of vivid scenes, which a reader can almost envision as scenes from a play. However, certain themes and issues emerge here which will be important in later works: the relationship between a novice and an older mentor, the position of Canada in western world culture, allegorical patterns in life and in art, and the psychological inevitability of the deaths of certain characters. All of these present topics for discussion which might lead to comparisons with the way these elements are developed in later Davies novels. In addition, a discussion might be held on Davies's success in portraying a female consciousness. A Mixture of Frailties is unusual among Davies's works in having a young woman as its central character.

1. A common criticism of A Mixture of Frailties is that Monica Gall is less interesting and less vividly characterized than some of the male characters.

Do you agree? Does Monica Gall fail to come to life?

2. At the end of the novel, Robertson Davies tells the reader that Monica "knew what she should do," but he does not say what that is. Why does the author omit this important piece of information?

3. Is there a similarity between the way Giles Revelstoke thinks about the critic Stanhope Aspinwall and the conductor Sir Benedict Domdaniel?

What do his attitudes about these two characters reveal about Revelstoke's personality?

4. Examine Monica Gall's feelings about her mother after Ma Gall dies.

Would Monica have the same feelings of closeness had her mother lived on?

5. Some critics complain that Davies's makes Canadian life appear needlessly limited and small in this novel.

Do you agree?

6. At the end of the novel, Dean Knapp is delivering a sermon about the way people learn. Look at the text of his sermon and consider how it may be applied to the learning that is done in A Mixture of Frailties.

7. Robertson Davies has said that "most people die of being themselves."



Can this idea be applied to the death of Giles Revelstoke or Ma Gall?

8. When Monica first meets Sir Benedict Domdaniel in London, he tells her there are two types of singers, the sexual singer and the bardic singer.

What are the characteristics of these two kinds of singers? Which kind does Monica become?

9. Does *A Mixture of Frailties* have any fairy-tale-like qualities about it?

10. Most of Giles Revelstoke's music has a literary reference point. What are the texts and subjects that he chooses to set to music? How do they relate to the themes developed in *A Mixture of Frailties*?



# Literary Precedents

Three literary precedents are suggested by John Scott Ripon, a character in the novel whom Monica meets at Neuadd Goch, the Welsh home of Giles Revelstoke's mother. Ripon asks Monica whether she thinks they are in "a Jane Austen situation, or a Trollope situation." Later, Ripon tells her after she has been embarrassed by Giles for bragging about her Canadian ancestry that they have "been living in a kind of Henry James climate for the past few days." The names of Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and Henry James are all pertinent as literary precedents for *A Mixture of Frailties*.

A recurring subject in Austen's fiction is the moral growth of the heroine.

A typical Austen heroine, whether it be the naive, impressionable Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) or the strong-willed title character of *Emma* (1815), sees things differently at the end of the novel from the beginning, having gained greater self knowledge during the course of the novel.

This process of maturation is an Austen theme, and it is the main subject of *A Mixture of Frailties*.

Anthony Trollope's fiction is filled with comic eccentrics. His style of characterization differs from Dickens's in that there is always at the root of each character a core of humanity that enables a reader to identify with the character, whereas in Dickens, the particular characteristic that makes someone eccentric or grotesque can at times obliterate all hints of humanity.

Many Trollope characters have moments of illumination when they (or the reader) see the error of their ways and recognize their share in the common plight of humanity. Davies includes such moments in *A Mixture of Frailties*, for example, in the attack scene between Molloy and Monica. The violence in this scene is muted and subsumed in the sense of the frustration of those who love in vain: "in a realm below the morality which was bred in the bone, they wept for the sadness of all unrequited love, all illmatched passion, and the prancing rhythm of *The Veleta* mounted to them like the indifference of a world where all loves were unhappy."

Finally Henry James is an appropriate name, for one of his great themes, the "international" theme, is important in *A Mixture of Frailties*. James likes to examine what happens when an American comes to England or France and finds a richer, more complicated civilization than the narrow, limited, relatively undeveloped world of his native land. If one substitutes Canadian for American, one will see a Canadian version of James's theme in this novel.

It is no accident that Monica Gall avoids as much as possible Lome and Meg McCorkill, the Canadian couple living in London, who are so homesick that they import their beef from Canada since "their [i.e., English] herds are riddled with T.B."

## Related Titles

A Mixture of Frailties is the last of the Salterton trilogy, three novels which share the city of Salterton and certain characters in common. In A Mixture of Frailties, unlike the earlier novels, Davies uses the city of Salterton as a place of departure rather than the primary setting. If one is interested in finding out more about Solomon and Veronica Bridgetower, Mrs. Louisa Hansen Bridgetower, Humphrey Cobbler, Miss "Puss" Pottinger, and Dean Knapp, one will find these characters in the earlier novels, *Tempest-Tost* (1951) about an amateur production of *The Tempest* and *Leaven of Malice* (1954) about the consequences of a false wedding announcement.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994