

The Miracle Short Guide

The Miracle by Irving Wallace

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Contents

The Miracle Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

The miracle of healing predicted by Saint Bernadette brings to the shrine the faithful, the doubtful, and the hopeful. Thousands want to be the one on whom the Virgin's blessing falls.

Wallace develops several groups of characters simultaneously, each group enacting the battle between faith and skepticism. At Lourdes their paths cross and their fates intertwine.

Sergei Tikhanov is Soviet foreign minister and heir-apparent to be prime minister when he learns that he has muscular dystrophy. Incognito as an American university professor, he travels to Lourdes in search of a cure, despite his official Communist faith of atheism. At Lourdes he hires Gisele Dupree, a local guide at the shrine, to assist him, unaware that Gisele is looking for an intelligence coup that will take her back to the United Nations headquarters and to her paramour.

Gisele discovers Tikhanov's identity and blackmails him.

Edith Moore has previously visited Lourdes and seems to have been miraculously cured of hip cancer. She returns to Lourdes to have her recovery verified, while her entrepreneurial husband schemes to take commercial advantage of his "miracle woman." The Moores face a personal crisis when a Lourdes physician tells Edith her cancer has returned: Edith wonders whether to save her husband's schemes by pretending a cure.

Ken Clayton, recently stricken by the same sarcoma, heads determinedly for Lourdes over the objection of his fiancée Amanda Spenser, a psychologist and ridiculer of faith healing. Determined to convince Ken to have surgery, Amanda begins a search for Bernadette of Lourdes' diary, rumored to prove that her visions were fraudulent.

Amanda is assisted by Liz Finch, a reporter desperately searching for the story that will make her reputation and career. Mikel Hurtado has come to Lourdes to plant a bomb at the shrine.

The promise of a miracle has created a truce between Spanish authorities and Basque rebels; Hurtado is determined to sting his fellow Basques back into resistance with a terrorist act. His plans are complicated when he saves Natale Rinaldi from rape. An aspiring opera singer mysteriously struck blind on the eve of her debut, Natale has made the pilgrimage to Lourdes. Mikel and Natale fall in love, pitting revolutionary faith against religious faith.

As the miracle day dawns, there is a murder and murder avenged, an act of great self-sacrifice, news of a medical breakthrough, a tragedy barely avoided, and a miraculous cure. Each character's fate seems just: some rewarded, some punished, and some given a second chance to mend their ways.



Social Concerns

In the 1960s and 1970s, orthodox Christianity was challenged by serious theological controversy (e.g., the Death of God debate) and new popular images of Christ (e.g., the rock musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar* [motion picture, 1973]). In the 1980s interest in traditional Christian faith and piety reemerged. In increasing numbers Catholics and some Protestants visited shrines like Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal — places where the Blessed Virgin Mary had appeared and where miraculous cures seemed to occur. In *The Miracle* Wallace blends topical issues from each shrine. At Lourdes miraculous cures are subjected to — and some survive — rigorous scientific investigation; regarding Fatima, rumors abound about a mysterious "third letter" from Lucia dos Santos (who first saw the Virgin's apparition in 1917) to the Pope which was said to contain a revelation from the Blessed Mother. Wallace's plot begins when the fictitious Pope John Paul III (a pontiff of deep, simple faith modeled on John Paul II) makes public a letter from Bernadette of Lourdes containing the promise that the Virgin Mary will work a miracle at her shrine in mid-August.



Techniques

Wallace skillfully creates the four plot lines. Each story has a central conflict between faith and doubt; within each story the faithful are tempted to disbelieve, and the doubtful are tempted to believe. With these shifting hopes and fears, Wallace orchestrates a number of miniature confrontations and climaxes within each subplot. In the last third of the novel Wallace interweaves the plot lines so that each character affects the life and fate of someone in a different plot line.

Also interwoven in the novel is the story of Bernadette of Lourdes. Wallace uses two priests (Father Hearn in Chicago and Father Ruland at Lourdes) to recount the historical facts. To them he seamlessly attaches a fictitious diary of Bernadette's later life; through the diary and several minor characters who have been custodians of it, Wallace explores the tantalizing psychological theory that Bernadette suffered from hysteria.

Wallace has no theory about miracles to argue. The novelist's own stand is represented by the book's third epigraph from a Jesuit priest, John La Farge: "For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not believe in God, no explanation is possible." Some of the characters are admirable believers while others are not; some doubters are sympathetic characters while others are unattractive. The writer leaves the case undecided so that readers who believe in miracles and readers who trust in modern medicine both feel vindicated.

Themes

The central theme is belief in miracles, especially miracles concerned with healing the body of disease or illness. Contrasting epigraphs open the novel and frame the debate: "They say miracles are past" (William Shakespeare) and "The Age of Miracles is forever here!" (Thomas Carlyle). On one side are those who think that miracles are illusions which cannot stand the scrutiny of modern science or delusions which reflect the self-deception, desperation, and naivete of the believer. On the other side are those who accept illogical or unpredictable improvement in health as evidence of divine intervention. The novel describes many people seeking a miracle; one occurs that is unexpected, known only to a few and completely unexplained.



Key Questions

The Miracle will appeal to the majority of readers. It has all the elements of a "good read": a rich cast of characters, multiple plot lines that stir varied emotions, and information about intriguing but not widely known subjects (Bernadette and Lourdes). A discussion group can focus on all of these aspects or concentrate on one.

1. The cast of characters includes persons to like or laugh at, admire or hate, sympathize with or root against.

Which characters stir these emotions?

2. The idea of "poetic justice" is characteristic of popular fiction. It demands that a character's fate at the end of a story be determined by his or her moral worth. Does Wallace dispense poetic justice to his characters?

3. In Wallace's novels the character who is a writer often emerges as the hero or heroine. Is this true of Liz Finch?

4. Popular novels need "an inciting incident" early in the book to get the story moving and hook the reader.

What is the inciting incident here? Is there more than one?

5. The midpoint of a novel is usually a turning point where the varied plot strands come together and the action takes a more definite direction. At the middle of *The Miracle*, Liz Finch discusses the character of Saint Bernadette with Father Ruland. Does the scene represent the turning point in the novel?

6. A *deus ex machina* is a character or device invented at the last minute to save characters whom the novelist cannot save otherwise from the predicament they were placed in. Is Dr.

Kleinberg a *deus ex machina*?

7. Does *The Miracle* add anything substantial to the understanding of Bernadette projected by Zola and Werfel in their anti- and pro-Bernadette novels?

Literary Precedents

The Miracle is not the first best seller about Lourdes. Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette* (1942) is a reverent retelling of the girl's story. Werfel's Bernadette is more than a Catholic saint. She is a true mystic whose visions magnify the presence of the divine in the world; her dedication and self-sacrifice is the highest nobility humanity is capable of.

Werfel is more interested in the spiritual values of a special individual and less concerned with the miracles of healing attributed to the shrine.

Related Titles

Wallace wrote one other novel with a religious theme. In *The Word* (1972), a new unorthodox translation of the Bible challenges the idea of Christ's divinity. It contains the Gospel of James, which tells how Jesus survived the Crucifixion and continued his ministry for two decades. Its central male character is Steve Randall who, like Hurtado, is a modern man who has lost his traditional faith. Its central female character is Angela who, like Natale, offers a love powerful enough to restore faith. *The Word* is based on the controversial Dead Sea Scrolls whose discovery in the 1940s provided new insight into early Christianity. An earlier best seller on the topic is *The Q Document* (1964) by James Hall Roberts.

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