MOO Short Guide

MOO by Jane Smiley

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Characters

M OO, a satirical novel set in a midwestern university, has a large cast of animal and human characters. "Earl Butz," a hog being raised secretly in solitary confinement to determine how large he can become, epitomizes how scientists have cruelly domesticated animals to the point that their ties to the natural world have been completely obliterated. Earl Butz's only memory of the natural world concerns a day spent gamboling as a piglet in a field. When accidentally freed from his subterranean pen, Earl Butz can scarcely run and has no instincts for escape. Unaccustomed to exercise, the hog drops dead from his exertions.

Student characters include Bob Carlson, Earl Butz's devoted, muscular caretaker; Mary Jackson, an AfricanAmerican from Chicago who has trouble identifying with whites and encounters subtle racism; Gary Olson, a would-be novelist who spends his time eavesdropping on conversations for story ideas; Diane, an ambitious, would-be sorority sister looking for the right fraternity brother; Sherri Johnson, the whining eldest child of a family of twelve who suffers from overweight; and Keri, the former Warren County Pork Queen who wants no one to know her past. All are socially and academically insecure and work hard to develop suitable personae and passable, intellectual skills, not always successfully.

Faculty and administrators make up the largest contingent of characters.

The former include Lionel Gift, a world-renowned economist whose vanity knows no bounds and whose thinking supports relentless exploitation of natural and human resources; Helen Levy, the chair of foreign languages whose scholarship primarily consists of gardening and cooking; Timothy Monahan, an insecure, second-tier novelist who is up for promotion on the promise of his third novel; Margaret Bell, an African-American English professor who would rather teach elsewhere but finds the market closing even for beneficiaries of affirmative action; Bo Jones, a specialist in hogs who has dreamed up the Earl Butz experiment only to disappear into Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in search of wild boar; Dean Jellinek the recipient of a grant to develop cows that can provide milk without bearing calves; Cecilia Sanchez, a divorced assistant professor of Spanish who finds teaching in the Midwest a physically chilling experience despite being warmly received by two male faculty members; and Chairman X, a middle-aged 1960s radical whose passion for organic horticulture leads to conflicts with administrators and economists.

Administrators and staff are fewer but central to the plot of the novel. The identical, fifty-five-year-old twin brothers Ivar and Nils Harstad, the provost and the dean of extension services respectively, contrast in behavior. Ivar, a bachelor, tends to respond passively to campus crises and his long term liaison with Helen Levy. By contrast, Nils, a childless widower, has a more active approach to life, having become a committed Christian fundamentalist who seeks marriage with Marly Hellmich, a thirty-five-year-old cafeteria employee. Unknown to his would-be fiancee, Nils plans to become the parent of six perfect children and move to Poland to help agriculture recover from communist rule.

Marly, for all her religious devotion, is surprised by Nils's proposal but initially sees his offer as a way to escape from poverty and her obstreperous father. Elaine Dobbs-Jellinek, the divorced wife of Dean Jellinek works in the grants office and specializes in state and regional funding sources. She constantly frets that she has been eased out of the Washington power circuit by Jack Parker, and that she has a lower expense account. However, the dominant administrator/staff-person is Loraine Walker, Ivar Harstad's secretary, who knows the location of campus skeletons and has the computer skills and access to ferret out developing scandals and to cover her tracks in the process. She foils several questionable schemes in the course of the novel.

Two non-university characters also contribute to confusion at MOO U. Loren Stroop, an eighty-four-year-old farmer and inventor, develops a revolutionary piece of farm equipment which he bequeaths to the university to keep it out of the hands of the government and agribusinesses. He fears they will destroy it for fear of disrupting their current operations. On the other hand, Arlen Martin, a chicken tycoon, tries to bribe the university to provide cover for various schemes that would create ecological disaster in Costa Rica.

Tempted by his largesse despite previous scandals, university officials give way to temptation only to be foiled by Mrs. Walker.

Social Concerns

MOO focuses on a broader community than Smiley's previous novels, which dealt primarily with individuals or families trying to make sense of the personal, social, and historical forces at work in their lives. By placing MOO in a midwestern university setting, Smiley can introduce a diverse cast of characters from many walks of life whose primary relationship is institutional.

Thus, many of the characters whom she introduces never interact directly, even though each's actions and inactions affect the others. The reason underlying this approach is that Smiley's concern is the institution itself and its impact on the people, often foolish and self-centered, who comprise its constituencies — students, faculty, staff, administration, community members, and politicians. Whatever their individual failings and hypocrisies, these people are open to self-examination and, in Smiley's eyes, wisdom. What is often a savage satire of the idiocies of the academic community and the larger society, ends up being a celebration of an institution that, unlike governmental and corporate America, allows people to learn from their mistakes and to renew their lives. For all its weaknesses, MOO University nurtures people when functioning at its best.

Techniques

MOO is a highly plotted novel of short chapters in which Smiley keeps bringing up to date the complicated lives of her many characters. Chronologically organized around the fall to spring academic year, the narrative moves at a breathless pace with complication after complication in each character's life, all leading to a neat set of resolutions.

The constant shifting among the large cast of disparate characters requires constant shifts in language so that the thoughts and dialogue are appropriate for persons as limited as Earl Butz, as paranoid as Loren Stroop, and as pompous as Lionel Gift. One device Smiley uses repeatedly is university writing. Gary Olson's stories based on his eavesdropping are hilarious parodies of creative writing assignments. Memoranda from various officials mimic the bureaucratic doublespeak common in such texts. Quotations from university catalogs mirror the bland best-of-all-possible-worlds of such documents.

Smiley also inserts print and television accounts of campus events to show the sensationalism and inaccuracy common to such reporting, plus raging statements by politicians interested in providing a quality education at the lowest possible price.

This combination of a fast-pacedplot and linguistic diversity makes MOO a lively reading experience, in tone very different from Smiley's other work.

Themes

MOO examines several themes. The most obvious concerns sexual maturation. Among students, faculty, staff, and administrators there is widespread sexual activity that often reveals a loneliness in the characters. For the students, sex is often a frustrating but frantic round of copulation and shortlived infatuation. Once the initial thrill of experimentation ends, however, the students begin to realize that fornication itself has few long-term satisfactions. Older faculty, administrators, and staff have more complex reactions to their sexual longings. Many have already experienced promiscuity, divorce, widowhood, or adultery and are seeking committed relationships based on concern, forgiveness, and sharing. It is no accident that Smiley ends the novel with a wedding in which an adulterous couple, 1960s radicals with four children, finally legalize their relationship. Several other couples also try to form more mature ties.

Less sensational but of equal importance is the theme of money and its role in both the destruction and survival of the university. Throughout the novel, characters constantly worry about money: Students wonder how their resources, family contributions, scholarships, and loans will meet expenses; faculty battle for grants, promotions, advances, royalties, and expense accounts to maintain a lifestyle and scholarship that ranges from selfindulgent to frivolous. Occasionally, their greed backfires in negative publicity, unpaid bills, or waste. Nevertheless, adequate sources of revenue are crucial if the university is to educate students properly. Here, too, Smiley rescues the various characters from destitution after a roller coaster plot of recisions so that they can pursue the worthwhile aspects of university life.

Key Questions

As a satirical comic novel, MOO offers of wealth of targets for analysis in terms of both what Smiley says about the modern university and what she implies about the culture in which it exists. Because it differs radically from her other novels, it also sheds light, by contrast, on these other works.

1. Does Smiley's depiction of the insecurities, foibles, and ambitions of her student characters ring true? Are there any groups or types of students she avoids including? Would they be suitable for satire?

2. What impression of the nature of teaching does the novel present? Is Smiley critical of the teaching students receive?

3. Are Smiley's faculty characters believable individuals or do they seem two-dimensional stereotypes? Would more three-dimensional characters be as comic?

4. What purpose does the fact that Ivar and Nils Harstad are twins serve?

5. In what ways is MOO critical of American government and business?

Can you think of personages who act in the way Governor Early and Arlen Martin behave?

6. Does Smiley's literal use of deus ex machina to resolve her plot seem plausible? Is it a convention of comedy?

7. Is Smiley's satire neutral or biased? If the latter, whom does she favor?

8. What symbolic purpose does the hog Earl Butz serve? The destruction of "Old Meats"?

9. If the goal of satire is to improve flawed institutions through humorously showing their faults, what goods does Moo University have that are worth saving?

10. How does Smiley use food to reveal character?

11. What insights into sexual, ethnic, and racial relations does MOO offer?

12. In what respects is MOO a counterbalance to the pessimism of The Greenlanders and A Thousand Acres?

Literary Precedents

As Smiley's 1993 article "Fiction in Review" makes clear, MOO is consciously built on a modern satiric tradition that includes writers such as Garrison Keillor, David Lodge, Rupert Everett, Michael Malone, T. Coraghessan Boyle, and Walter Kirn. In addition, Smiley mentions such as like Jane Austen and Vladimir Nabokov as comic masters.

Readers will also confirm that MOO is in the tradition of Mark Twain, who frequently turned his satirical attention to American institutions he considered wrongly self-important, like slavery in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) or organized religion in Innocents Abroad (1869). Likewise, readers will also find parallels in Smiley's satire to Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961), which takes on an American institution, the military, comparable in pervasiveness to the university.

Related Titles

MOO charts new territory for Smiley in terms of plotting, language, setting, characters, and tone. Like The Greenlanders (1988), it differs radically from novels like A Thousand Acres (1991), which form the primary basis of her literary reputation and popularity.

What MOO suggests is that Smiley is unwilling to write fiction that merely replicates her successful writing, that she relishes the challenge of attempting something new. In this she illustrates her multidimensional career as a scholar, teacher, and writer.

Copyright Information

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