

# **My Present Age Short Guide**

## **My Present Age by Guy Vanderhaeghe**

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# Contents

<a href="#">My Present Age Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Techniques/Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Themes/Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>



## Social Concerns

An epigraph from Soren Kierkegaard encapsulates the social and philosophic tenor of *My Present Age*: "But the present generation, wearied by its chimerical efforts, relapses into complete indolence." This is an age of fragmented families — the narrator's parents have retired to a mobile-home park near Brownsville, Texas. His estranged wife, Victoria, having walked out months ago, leaves Ed in a postlapsarian phase — something he wryly calls "that paradis perdu" when he feels a victim of "the Great Persecution" by an irascible old neighbor and the thudding banalities of the Beast of the radio hotline who continually berates the unemployed protagonist for sloth.

"We're all becoming what we really are," Ed contends, and offers us as evidence Sadler, "the ultimate Simplifier." Once a big-time campus radical urging Luddite atrocities on computer centers, and now a wild-eyed prophet for the Independent Pre-Millennial Church of God's First Chosen, Sadler shows us the vulgarizing power of trendiness.

Ed's story is that of a struggle against those social forces that conspire against man — especially the weaker of men who cannot struggle except by excuses and evasions.



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

In the black comedy tradition of J. D. Salinger, Ken Kesey, and Robert Kroetsch, *My Present Age* manages to take clichéd neurotic characters and exploit their foibles and fancies for the reader's satiric entertainment. This is a novel that has the pulse of modern times, and although its protagonist is eccentric, even demented at times, he is really an antihero and should not, therefore, be taken as an altogether reliable mirror of reality.

In the hands of a less skillful writer, the characters and plot of this book would have turned into soap-opera.

but Vanderhaeghe knows how to turn boors and fools into entertainment.

The structure incorporates the standard conflict between reality and fantasy, as Vanderhaeghe shows us a man with several complexes seeking refuge in flights of literary imagination, and thereby acquiring yet another problem — that of unfulfilled revenge. Much of the comedy is derived not only from the quirks and kinks of modern life — the platitudinous radio hotline-host, the creepy neighbor, the adulterous yet righteous wife, the former radical socialist turned affluent apologist for law and order, the soi-disant ex-convict with aspirations for literary fame — but from the expansions and contractions of the protagonist's will as well. Ed's obesity is, perhaps, a symptom of his overweighted pull towards earth and the spheres of gluttony, sloth, lies, and anguish. His literary creation, Sam Waters, offers only momentary transcendence from life's problems. Ed's usual movement is downward — a gravitation towards inertia, laziness, dreaming, and complaining. The supreme irony is that of the voyeur observing his own inaction and frustration — perfectly aware of the very things that hold him down as a victim, yet unable to stir his will sufficiently to break out of narcissistic folly.



## Themes/Characters

A black comedy about a man whose frustrations and crises often explode into lurid fantasies, *My Present Age* provides a sharp portrait of a modern loser. Tormented by the failure of his marriage, stigmatized by an irascible, prying neighbor, Ed is trapped by the repetitive rituals of a banal existence.

His unceasing diet of Cocoa Puffs is a perfect expression of his own essential softness as a person. Made obese by his junk food and laziness, he is a perennial adolescent in his exasperation and wish-fulfillment fantasies. His ex-wife, Victoria, is everything he is not: "assured, idealistic, ungrubby." When asked by her what he intends to do with his life, he replies: "Simplify it," but his compulsive chatter and chronic inability to cope with frustrations stamp him as the modern century's man of Angst. His anger, hurt, and neurosis lead to some near-demented acts of retaliation against his antagonists.

The one sustaining strength in his life is his imagination which, although translated into grotesque scenarios of absurdly incredible heroism, swaddles him in an illusion of victory over awesome odds. A boy-man who identifies with boyhood heroes, Huck Finn, D'Artagnan, Chingachgook, he dreams of revenge against his foes, and projects his deepest urges in his fictional creation, Sam Waters, a laconic, coldeyed, fantastically potent western hero.

This "lie" in his fictional world mirrors the "lies" in his real life. He pretends to be more important than he really is, impersonating a type of writer who has made *The Paris Review*. Deficient in his own literary productivity, he plagiarizes from other writers and dares to lecture on creative writing.

He knows himself as "a bad risk, a man on the margin, a doubtful character." His vulnerable personality is assailed all too easily by the forces of establishmentarian law and authority.

Unable to convince his ex-wife to return to him, he spies on her and attempts to track her down. Unable to activate his own frequently inert will, he is liberal in judging others. Considered by some as being "terminally narcissistic," he is actually helplessly dependent on the sympathy of others, and would like to use his ex-wife as a psychological crutch.

Reduced by his own paranoia into being a grotesque victim, he bids goodbye to his world of enemies, ex-lovers, and former friends, in the hope of embracing a simpler life.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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