

No Word from Winifred Short Guide

No Word from Winifred by Amanda Cross and Carolyn Gold Heilbrun

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Characters

With few exceptions, the characters in *No Word from Winifred* are the least stereotypical of any in the Amanda Cross novels. The novel features, in addition to Kate Fansier, several finely-drawn female characters. Winifred Ashby, as readers learn about her from her diary and the comments of others who have known her, is an intelligent, sensitive, and strong individual whose lack of great physical attractiveness is compensated by her dignity and sense of honor. People are attracted to her, and even to the idea of her, as is Leighton, Kate's niece, who at the end of the novel intends to seek her halfway around the world. Leighton herself is a more fully-developed character than she is in *Death in a Tenured Position* (1981). Now in her late twenties, she still hopes to become an actress, and is eager, as she puts it, to play Watson to Kate's Sherlock Holmes. Bidy Heffenreffer is a stunningly attractive college professor with whom Kate feels an instant affinity when she goes to California to talk to her about Winifred.

Bidy is a complex character in the process of being divorced from Martin Heffenreffer, not because of his affair with Winifred, but because that situation — and her concurrent friendship with Winifred — has revealed how different they are. Even the female characters not actually present in the novel, such as the now-deceased novelist and scholar Charlotte Stanton and her friend Harriet St. John Merriweather, take on life and identity. Several of the male characters, in contrast, are unattractive stereotypes, such as Harriet Merriweather's son George, who is a pompous bumbler, and Stan Wyman, whom Kate meets at a Modern Language Association convention, who is a scheming man on the make. The result of this contrast in characterization is to underscore the inherent feminism of the novelist's vision.



Social Concerns

In *No Word from Winifred*, Carolyn Heilbrun addresses many issues raised by the women's movement: the right to choose a lifestyle appropriate to one's own values, the importance of women's friendships, and the increasing interest in women's literature and biography.

This is at least as much a novel of ideas as it is a mystery story, and the two elements are linked by the steps Kate Fansier takes to explore the disappearance of Winifred Ashby, the honorary niece of an English novelist named Charlotte Stanton, with whom Winifred had spent summers in Oxford as a child. Winifred's diary, retrieved from the New England dairy farm where she worked just before her disappearance, speaks to her childhood yearning to be a boy rather than a girl, her love for Oxford, and her chosen isolation in New England as an adult. In the process of filling in the gaps in Winifred's life, Kate has conversations that explore changes in women's roles, particularly as these affect and are affected by careers and divorce. Whereas in previous novels Kate has had close friendships primarily with men, in *No Word from Winifred* she forms relationships with other women, including Charlie Lucas, who is writing a biography of Charlotte Stanton, and Bidley Heffenreffer, whose husband has had an affair with Winifred. Bidley and Winifred have become close friends before either of them realizes that they in effect share the same man, and remain friends following their realization; one of the most compelling comments in the novel on changing relationships is Bidley's husband's inability to handle this closeness between wife and lover.

Techniques

Although the mysterious disappearance of Winifred Ashby forms the central plot of *No Word from Winifred*, Heilbrun connects to it several subsidiary plots — notably the relationships between Toby Van Dine and Charlie Lucas and between Bidy and Martin Heffenreffer — which both advance the mystery plot and allow the author to comment on changing human relationships. Thus the novel is richer than the straightforward mystery novel, and shows Heilbrun's development in the genre since the 1964 *In the Last Analysis*. Part of the novel also turns on an elaborate insiders' joke. As part of her investigation, Kate attends a meeting of the Modern Language Association, all the while professing her loathing of these meetings of her own professional organization because of the pomposity of the papers and the crowded elevators. The fact that two years before the publication of this novel its author, Carolyn Heilbrun, served as president of the Modern Language Association creates a humorous irony that is appreciated only by those who know the real identity and professional history of "Amanda Cross."

Themes

The overriding theme in *No Word from Winifred* is self-determination.

Winifred's early desire to be male instead of female springs directly from her perception that men have more freedom — in dress, in education, in activity. Her work as a hired hand on a dairy farm constitutes a self-imposed exile following her break-up with Martin Heffenreffer, and her final departure for India, although done at Martin's insistence that she leave the country, is undertaken in a spirit of adventure. By contrast, Martin exhibits little self-determination: his obsession with Winifred and his inability to tolerate her friendship with his wife isolate him from all human contact. A second theme is the necessity of just that contact, not only between women, but between genders. One illustration of this is the relationship between Toby Van Dine, a partner in Kate's brother's law firm, and Charlie Lucas — a relationship based on mutual respect as well as love. Throughout *No Word from Winifred* Heilbrun contrasts destructive relationships, based on power and selfish need, with constructive ones, based on mutuality of interests and support. Kate Fansler's relationship with her husband, Reed Amhearst, is an instance of the latter type, as is true in all of the Amanda Cross mysteries.



Key Questions

This novel was written many years after the first mystery with Kate and Reed. They are fully fashioned characters who have developed during the course of the series of novels. There have been changes in the world of academe and the world in general in the nearly twenty years between the publication of the first in the series and the latest entry.

1. How have the characters of Kate and Reed changed? Or have they ?

Have they matured? Has their relationship altered?

2. What insight into professional societies does Cross/Heilbrun provide the reader? Is it an accurate picture? If it is, why would Heilbrun continue to associate with that world?

3. Kate maintains her amateur status as a sleuth. How does she compare to the new women sleuths like V. I. Warshawski and Kinsey Malone?

4. Kate has several relationships with women in this novel. Why has Cross detailed the relationship with Charlie Lucas and Bidy Heffenreffer?

5. Winifred's development and growth could be seen as a metaphor for the women's movement — initially she wanted to be male and then she changed her mind. Why did she want to be male and why did she change her mind?

6. This novel is a study in contrasts.

The women share some qualities but also stand in sharp contrast to one another. Winifred lacks physical attractiveness whereas Bidy is very attractive. What are some other contrasts you can identify in the characters?

7. Since this is novel about relationships, which relationships are destructive and which are constructive. Although the author seems to be saying that constructive relationships are possible between men and women, why is Reed (the ideal male character) so often just a shadow figure?

8. How (or) would this novel be different if Kate-the-sleuth were male?

9. Although Kate's niece, Leighton is more fully developed in this work, can she ever really be Watson to Kate's Sherlock Holmes? Why or why not?

10. Why can Martin Heffenreffer not handle the relationship between Bidy and Winifred whereas the women can?

In other novels, the author has some very conventional ideas about sexuality. Is that the case in this book?

Literary Precedents

This novel follows in the tradition of Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1948). Miss Pym is a financially independent woman who has chosen not to marry. When she is invited to give a lecture at a college, she finds more than appreciative listeners. She finds several mysteries that she reluctantly solves. Tey is the pen name of Elizabeth Mackintosh.

Robert Bernard's *Deadly Meeting* (1970) is set during the annual conference of the Modern Language Association. Professor Peter Jackson, chair of the department of English at Wilton University is killed at the conference.



Copyright Information

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