A Nurse's Story Study Guide

A Nurse's Story by Peter Baida

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Peter Baida's "A Nurse's Story" was published in the *Gettysburg Review* in 1998. The story met with critical acclaim, was awarded first place in the O. Henry Short Story Award competition in 1999, and was reprinted as part of the anthology affiliated with the award. It was reprinted again in 2001 as the title story of the posthumous collection *A Nurse's Story and Others*. Within the complicated but delicately managed episodic structure of "A Nurse's Story," Baida tells the story of Mary McDonald, who is dying of cancer. Interwoven with Mary's story is the story of the town, Booth's Landing, in which collective histories and personal memories intermingle. There is the story of nurses and of the nursing profession, which is fraught with political and ethical frustrations. Finally, the story hints at the feminist movement of the 1960s, during which women came together to initiate social and professional changes. In telling "A Nurse's Story," Baida brings to the surface a series of philosophical questions, which resist easy answers or familiar platitudes, demanding instead that readers think about the world in which they live and the lives that they nurture.

Author Biography

Peter Baida was born on July 26, 1950, in Baltimore, Maryland. After receiving degrees from Harvard College (B.A., magna cum laude, 1972) and Boston University (M.A., 1973), he completed an M.B.A. at the University of Pennsylvania in 1979. Upon graduation he began a lifelong affiliation with the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, where he took on diverse responsibilities, culminating with an extended and successful tenure as the center's director of direct mail fundraising from 1984 through 1999.

Since Baida established himself within the financial and business communities of New York, it is perhaps not surprising that his first book-length project was on business. His *Poor Richard's Legacy: American Business Values from Benjamin Franklin to Donald Trump*, published in 1990, was immediately well received as an entertaining social history that explored the personalities and business acumen of entrepreneurs and also showed the spirit of the country as it was captured in self-help books of the day as well as in the critical writings of such critics as Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951), and Canadian-born economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1908–2006).

Complementing Baida's success in the business world and in writing about the affairs and personalities associated with the wealth of the nation were the short stories that he submitted to a number of prominent U.S. literary magazines. In 1998, the *Gettysburg Review* published "A Nurse's Story," a story that blends the worlds of business and of illness, both of which were familiar to Baida, given his work experience and that fact that he was a hemophiliac. The story was a critical success and garnered a first prize in the 1999 O. Henry Short Story Awards. It was reprinted as part of the annual O. Henry Prize anthology and again in 2001 as the title story of Baida's first and only collection of short fiction.

Baida died of liver failure and post-surgical complications on December 10, 1999, within months of receiving his O. Henry Award.

Plot Summary

"A Nurse's Story" begins with the pain that sixty-nine-year-old Mary McDonald feels in her bones. A nurse for forty years, she is dying slowly from a cancer that first appeared in her colon and now has spread to her liver and bones. Confined to her room on the third floor of the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center, she is still very much in control of her faculties, which allows her to recognize where her pain "comes from and what it means." Acutely aware of the pressures of nursing, she is determined to raise the issues of wages and working conditions with a new nurse at the center, Eunice Barnacle, whose reaction is to walk away from any conversation that even touches upon the question of her worth to the institution in which she works.

Sitting in her room, Mary reflects upon a patient from forty years earlier, Ida Peterson, who was admitted to Mary's ward "with a tumor in her neck near the carotid artery." When Mary was called into Ida's room following a rupture of the artery that left the patient and the room covered in blood, she was forced to confront both the physical shock of the scene and the philosophic implications of Ida's desire for a "good death," which in Ida's case meant a death that did not involve medical intervention and allowed her to die in the presence of her husband. In this single moment, Mary's view of health, death, and the dignity of the individual all changed dramatically. This remembered episode also reveals that Mary respected Ida's wish for a "good death," allowing her to die as she wanted.

Now, Mary and Eunice continue their conversation about Mary's past work in the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital. Specifically, the younger nurse is interested in Mary's role in bringing a nurses' union into the hospital in the mid-1960s, and whether Mary feels that the struggles for certification helped the cause of the nurses.

Next, the narrator gives a brief history of the "unpretentious" and historically rich community of Booth's Landing. Located "on the east side of the Hudson River, fifty miles north of New York City," the town was shaped, both economically and politically, by the energies of its two most prominent families: the Booths and the Tiesslers. Paragraph after paragraph in this section of the story details the presence of these two families in the town, beginning with the recognition that "for as long as anyone can remember, one member of the Booth family has run the town's bank, and one member of the Tiessler family has run the silverware factory." In tracing civic and philanthropic endeavors of the two families, the narrator connects their presence in the town with the history of Mary, who not only lives in a geriatric care center that bears both their names but whose professional life as a nurse began when she "fulfilled the requirements for her nursing degree" at Booth-Tiessler Community College.

Moving back and forth in time the episodic story continues with Mary remembering one of her first conversations with Clarice Hunter, a colleague at the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital who in 1965 had solicited Mary's help in the movement to form a nurses' union. Frustrated with both Mary's narrow range of vision and what she calls Mary's Catholic "programming" to be compliant, Clarice challenged Mary's beliefs about

life, work, and her sense of her own value as an employee of the hospital and as a person living in a modern society.

Next, Mary remembers her first meeting with her future husband George McDonald, who at the time was a twenty-seven-year-old military veteran of the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway. Thinking of the movies they saw and the meals they ate on their earliest dates, Mary remembers their shared history with fondness, commenting on the integrity of their thirty-nine-year marriage, on the three children that they raised, and on the lessons that they learned together. Filled with tenderness towards his gentle, unambitious spirit, she recalls specifically one conversation that they had on their second date, a picnic at Dabney Park. George stated his indifference to making a lot of money and she agreed, saying, “There’s more to life than money.”

Back in the present, Mary meets with Dr. Tom Seybold, who is treating her for the colon cancer that is, in Mary’s words, “chewing up [her] liver.” Gentle and humane, Dr. Seybold is another reminder of Mary’s connections to the town and to the people who live and die in it. In a brief but telling episode-within-an episode, Mary remembers her own time spent with Tom’s mother, Laura, following two miscarriages, and again after she had tried to commit suicide in the aftermath of losing her babies.

A brief episode follows, dominated by quick bursts of dialogue in which Mary and a group of residents at the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center complain about the food and about the money they spend for what they consider to be second-rate care. The episode that follows opens with Mary remembering her grandmother, who died of colon cancer in the mid-1950s. The memories of her grandmother’s fate and Mary’s own interweave as this episode begins, connecting the generations of women by the stories they share and the cancers they battle. Mary remembers, too, the powerful relationship that had formed between her own grandmother and her colleague, Clarice Hunter, during the final days of the older woman’s life. Seeing Clarice as a treasure of humanity for the care she gave and the comfort she provided, Mary’s grandmother was ferocious in one of her final demands: that Clarice be summoned to her bedside in order to witness her passing and tend to the her body following her death.

A brief episode follows again on the nurse-patient relationship, as Eunice gives Mary a needle and asks her an important question: “What was it made you want a union?” The answer comes by way of a flashback, or looking back in time, to 1965 when an exhausted Clarice and an equally drained Mary complained to each other bitterly about the expectations and workload placed upon them by the hospital administration. The implications are clear from their conversation: Mary’s support for the union movement was born in her frustration as she watched her friend and coworker breakdown to tears over the workload.

Set just three days after the conversation between Clarice and Mary in 1965, the next episode recounts the weeks leading up to the nurses’ vote on unionization. Mary, who was initially against unions, swung her vote in favor of certification. The ripple effect of Mary’s declaration of support speaks to Mary’s reputation and influence with the other nurses. As the narrator observes: “if you talked to other nurses, you found out that

Mary's opinion made a difference." The episode ends with a summary of the outcome: "The vote drew near. Arguments are made, pro and con. Tempers flare. In September, 1965, the nurses voted in favor of a union."

Returning to the present, the next episode is a conversation between Eunice Barnacle and Pam Ryder, a colleague at the hospital. Talking casually about Mary's past involvement with the union movement, Eunice dismisses the value of Mary's struggle for recognition: "'That union can't help her now,' Eunice says." Next is an extended episode in which Mary remembers her sixty-ninth birthday party, held two months previous, when all her children gathered with her for what might be the last time: Brad, the youngest, who came from Seattle, where he has spent a decade making his own mark in the world of computer technology; George Jr., the one-time star athlete who has matured gracefully into a "quiet-voiced" attorney; and Bostonian Jane, a nurse like her mother, but with a troubled past and ongoing struggles to maintain sobriety.

The memory of the family gathering is juxtaposed suddenly with an episode in which Eunice, giving Mary a back rub, recounts the history of her own mother, who is currently serving a life sentence for the shotgun murder of her abusive boyfriend, Jethro. An obvious counterpoint to Mary's family history, this episode underscores the strengths of family ties, as the narrator implies that one of the reasons that Eunice moved to Booth's Landing was to be close enough to make the thirty-minute drive to visit her mother every Sunday.

The next episode focuses on the month of September 1967, a time of two important events in Mary's memory. The first was a forty-yard pass from her son, George Jr., to Warren Booth Jr. that won the county championship for the local high-school football team. The second event was the nurses' strike, which saw Mary on a picket line for the first time. With Clarice Hunter as the head of their strike committee, the nurses wanted more money and better job security, though the management of the hospital claimed in the press that the main issue was staffing levels. The spokesperson for the hospital, Sister Rosa, is a no-nonsense administrator who believes firmly that the role of management is to manage for the betterment of the institution as a whole, even if that might mean overlooking the needs of the employees.

Mary and the other nurses carried picket signs for six months, and the strike took its toll on the tightly knit town as people took sides, some supporting the nurses and others the hospital, which had hired "a company that specialized in fighting strikes." The strike was covered by newspaper reporter, Richard Dill, who Mary now knows as someone who lives on the same floor of the geriatric center as she does.

Their histories are, like so many in the town, casually connected: Richard's son Roger, a reporter for the local newspaper, once attended a camp at which Mary's daughter was a counselor. Richard's wife, Jennifer, was a patient of Mary's after a surgery that left her needing a colostomy bag. But as Mary remembers, many of the threads weaving through town life were frayed during the strike. Even her son George Jr. complained to her that the strike was potentially damaging his relationship with his football teammate and star receiver, who also happened to be the son of Warren Booth, chairman of the

board of the hospital. However much Mary loved football (she is a committed fan of the New York Giants), she was unbending in her determination to continue to walk the picket line in support of the nurses.

As Mary and Eunice talk about the 1967 strike at the beginning of the next episode, Mary explains that the Booth-Tiessler General Hospital is part of a chain of Catholic facilities, an affiliation that Mary claims was the reason that the nurses eventually had the strike turn in their favor. Standing in front of television cameras on a bitterly cold winter day, Mary had read the Sisters of Mercy mission statement aloud, noting that they were, on paper at least, committed "to act in solidarity with the poor, the weak, the outcast, the elderly, and the infirm."

Mary's reading, coupled with an extended fast by Beverly Wellstone, turned the tide of public opinion in the nurses' favor. The strike ended following a visit to Sister Rosa by an "emissary of the cardinal" that shifted the tone and spirit of the negotiations. In the end, the nurses received half of the salary increase they had asked for as well as more staff in the hospital. As Mary says to Eunice: "For the next three years, after we signed the contract, we had the staff to give the kind of care we wanted to give."

Mary returned to the hospital in which she had worked three days before her death on December 16, a date that Roger Dill notes in the obituary that he writes for the Booth's Landing *Gazette*. Mary's death sends ripples through Booth's Landing. Warren Booth Jr., the town's leading banker, reacts as his father might have at the news, with a businessman's blend of condolence masking a deeper indignation at the trouble the nurse had brought to his family's business and legacy. To Eunice Barnacle, Mary's death proves an impetus to begin her own agitation for fair wages and better working conditions and to begin talking with her generation of working women about the benefits of bringing a union to the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center. Nick Santino, the proprietor of Santino's Funeral Home, balances his embalming of Mary's body with stories about the care Mary gave his dying mother many years earlier. He recalls how Mary had attended his mother "like she was taking care of her own mother."

In the story's final episode, Mary falls into a dream-like state as she nears death. Sister Rosa comes to her in a vision, reassuring the dying nurse of what is to come and settling, finally, their still-unresolved debate over workers' rights and management's responsibilities. In a turnabout that surprises Mary, her one-time nemesis acknowledges that she was glad that the nurses had fought for their beliefs; "the whole system depends" on workers fighting for fair treatment, Sister Rosa concludes. With her children gathered around her, Mary closes her eyes and dies. When she opens her eyes, she finds herself reunited with her husband in the afterworld.

Characters

Eunice Barnacle

Born in Richmond, Virginia, into a deeply troubled family, Eunice Barnacle is “a lean, sharp-featured black woman in her middle twenties, with a straight nose, small teeth, wary eyes, and a straightforward manner.” A recent addition to the staff at the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center, she is responsible for the daily care of Mary McDonald, whom she questions intermittently about the history of the nurses’ union that Mary helped establish in the mid-1960s. One reason Eunice moved to New York, with her three-year-old daughter Coretta in tow, is to be nearer her mother, who is serving a life term for murder in Sing Sing Prison, located in nearby Ossining, New York.

Warren Booth

Chairman of the board of the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital during the 1967 nurses’ strike, Warren Booth stands for the complexities of the politics and the civic spirit of Booth’s Landing. Generously philanthropic, he is, at the same time, unyielding in his business ethic.

Warren Booth Jr.

Son of the chairman of the board of the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital during the 1967 nurses’ strike and recipient of a pass from George McDonald Jr. that had won the high school football team the county championship in the year of the strike, Warren Booth Jr. is the town’s leading banker. He is resentful still about the impact that the 1967 strike had on his family and his own teenage life. He remains a symbol, even in the 1990s, of the conservative base upon which small towns like Booth’s Landing are often built.

Richard Dill

Richard Dill is a reporter on the Booth’s Landing *Gazette* who covered the 1967 nurses’ strike and who now lives on the same floor as Mary McDonald at the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center. His son, Roger, has followed in his father’s footsteps and works for the local newspaper.

Roger Dill

Son of Richard Dill, Roger Dill follows in his father’s journalistic footsteps and becomes a reporter for the Booth’s Landing *Gazette*. Unlike his father, though, Roger is neither excited nor inspired by the events of the small town and remains emotionally and

imaginatively disengaged from its workings. He is responsible for writing Mary McDonald's obituary.

Eunice's mother

Sixteen years old when she gave birth to Eunice Barnacle in Richmond, Virginia, Eunice's mother is serving a life term in Sing Sing Prison for killing an abusive boyfriend, Jethro. As Eunice tells the story, her mother bailed Jethro out of jail in order to kill him. At the time of the story, Eunice's mother is thirty-nine years old.

Clarice Hunter

Ten years older than Mary McDonald, Clarice is a colleague who solicited Mary's help in 1965 in taking the first steps toward forming a nurses' union at the local hospital. She is also the first person to challenge Mary on her beliefs about life, work, and her sense of her own value as a person, a woman, and a hospital employee. Clarice Hunter was the head of the nurses' strike committee in 1967.

Clarice is also more intimately connected to Mary McDonald's past than union-building suggests. A lifelong friend, she was the nurse who cared for Mary's grandmother in the final days of her terminal battle with colon cancer. Mary's grandmother, who asked little from life or those around her, saw in Clarice "a jewel" of humanity. Even when surrounded by family as she lay dying, Mary's grandmother demanded with "a look so fierce that Mary still remembered it" that Clarice be at her bedside when she died.

Jane

Mary and George McDonald's only daughter, Jane, is a nurse. She has a troubled history and is always on the edge of alcoholic relapse. Living in Boston, she has two young daughters.

Sister Margaret

Sister Rosa's successor in the role of executive director of the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital, Sister Margaret became head of the institution in 1984. Her expertise in materials management "dazzled everyone who worked with her." She is also the director of the hospital when Mary McDonald is transferred there for the final days of her life.

Brad McDonald

The youngest child of Mary and George McDonald, Brad has moved to Seattle where he is making his own mark with the corporate giant Microsoft.

George McDonald

George McDonald is Mary's husband, whom she first met in 1948 while she was working in the emergency ward of the local hospital. He was twenty-seven when they met, "a big man, six foot three, with hair the color of fresh corn and a big boyish smile" that in many ways belied the fact that he had already fought in two significant battles of the World War II: the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway. Not ambitious, he taught music at the local high school and was happy being what he was in Booth's Landing. Married to Mary for thirty-nine years, he was a devoted husband and proud father of three children, "all of them grown now and moved away." He died of kidney failure in 1988, and Mary remembers him as "A man who rarely lost his temper, a father who taught his sons how to scramble eggs and his daughter how to throw a baseball, a small-town music teacher who loved the clarinet." As Mary dies, she awakens into a bright new world in which she is reunited with a young, healthy George.

George McDonald Jr.

Mary and George McDonald's oldest son is George Jr., a "gangling, loose-jointed, long-armed boy" who has grown up to be an "earnest, quiet-voiced" Chicago attorney dressed in rumpled suits." He is remembered by the townspeople for a touchdown pass that he threw to Warren Booth Jr. that won the local high school team the county championship in 1967, the same year as the now infamous nurses' strike.

Mary McDonald

A working nurse for forty years, sixty-nine-year-old Mary McDonald is dying slowly from a cancer that appeared first in her colon but has spread to her liver and bones. Confined to her room on the third floor of the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center, she is known as a political activist who advocates on behalf of patients' rights but, more importantly, on behalf of nurses and their struggle for fair pay and improved working conditions. She was, as Eunice Barnacle notes, one of the driving forces in bringing unionization of nurses to the local hospital and thus a symbol of the power of women to initiate a revolution both locally and nationally.

But as the story unfolds, Mary emerges as a much more rounded character, one who remembers fondly the courtship with her late husband George in the late 1940s, the raising of her children (George Jr., Brad, and Jane), her passion for beer (especially Guinness) and football (especially as it is played by the New York Giants), and her struggle with her faith when it comes in conflict with political necessity. Moreover, the story of her life soon becomes the story of the town and of the births, deaths, and tragedies that continue to be its daily business. At once individual, representative of a town and of a profession, Mary becomes, too, a symbol of an entire generation of revolutionary women.

Mary's Grandmother

A strong woman, Mary's grandmother died of colon cancer in the mid-1950s. "A plain-looking, plain-talking woman, with only an eighth-grade education," Mary's grandmother "expected nothing from life and generally got what she expected." A genealogical connection with Mary McDonald that expresses itself in the stories that they share and in the disease that kills them, Mary's grandmother is also a narrative thread that links the two women to Clarice Hunter, a union-raising colleague of Mary's and the nurse who tended her grandmother in her final days.

Ida Peterson

A minor character in the sense that she was a patient of Mary McDonald's more than forty years earlier, Ida Peterson is important because she brought to Mary's world a new understanding of the human need "to die a peaceful, dignified death," which in Ida's case meant a "natural death" (without medical intervention) in the presence of her husband. Although Mary had dealt with hundreds of patients since Ida, the memory of their brief interaction changed the way Mary thought about life, death, and the dignity of the individual.

Sister Rosa

The executive director of the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital during the 1967 nurses' strike, Sister Rosa had worked with Mary McDonald in 1962 on a plan to improve the patient scheduling in the radiation department. A "short, no-nonsense woman," Sister Rosa worked by the very simple mandate that "management must *manage*" for the best interest of the institution, which might at times come into direct conflict with the best interests of the employees. Sister Rosa comes to Mary McDonald as she slips into a dream-like state in the final moments of her life, talking with her one-time nemesis and reassuring her about what lay ahead and discussing, for one last time, the 1967 strike.

Nick Santino

Proprietor of Santino's Funeral Home, Nick Santino embalms Mary McDonald's body, while remembering how she took care of his own mother while she was dying. As he handles Mary's body with the latest embalming equipment, he remembers with tenderness how Mary treated his mother with humanity and deep respect, how she washed his mother's feet.

Laura Seybold

Mentioned briefly during one of Mary McDonald's memory episodes, Laura Seybold is the mother of Dr. Tom Seybold. Mary had cared for Laura during both of the miscarriages that had taken "the life out of her eyes" as well as later "during the three days [Laura] spent in the hospital after the Saturday night when she swallowed every pill in the house."

Dr. Tom Seybold

Mary McDonald's doctor, Tom Seybold, is "a large man with a friendly face, pink skin, and paprika-colored hair. His breath smells like peppermint." With strong hands and gentle humor, he is a representative of the many connections that Mary McDonald feels to the town, to the stories of the people who live in it, and through both of these lines of continuity, to her own history.

Ruth Sullivan

Ruth Sullivan is a nurse who worked with Mary McDonald and Clarice Hunter in the 1960s and during the tumultuous years leading up to the nurses' union vote.

Beverly Wellstone

"A nurse who had once been a nun," Beverly Wellstone fasted for thirty-three days in support of the striking nurses. Her decision marked the turning point in the strike.

Themes

The Struggle for Wage Equity

Prior to the 1960s, women working outside the home confronted a longstanding and substantial wage gap both in respect to the wages paid male workers in the same industry and to wages for so-called women's jobs, including nursing and care-giving. Fueled in part by the advances initiated by the burgeoning civil rights movement, women saw the sixties as an era in which barriers to employment equity and educational achievement would be challenged aggressively.

As Baida's "A Nurse's Story" reveals, this new political awareness was unprecedented in its influence. In taking the initial steps towards unionizing the nurses in the Booth-Tiessler Community Hospital, Mary McDonald and Clarice Hunter initiated a challenge that cut across age barriers (Clarice was ten years Mary's senior), issues of faith (a Catholic, Mary pickets a hospital run by the Church), and racial differences, as Eunice Barnacle's growing interest in the benefits of unionization underscores. Regardless of their differences or the historical period in which they find themselves working for a living, the women of the story are united by one question, repeated often by Mary and picked up at the end of the story by Eunice: "You think you're paid what you're worth?" In this sense, Baida's story captures the beginning of a revolution that shifted forever the way a country thought about sex, race, and wealth.

It was a revolution, too, that changed in equally important ways the intimate social fabric of communities across the nation, from the largest city, in which women in factories and offices united, and, as in "A Nurse's Story," to the smaller towns, founded upon a densely coded fusion of history, civic pride, and capitalist spirit. In a town like Booth's Landing, in which two prominent families are so influential and in which every story is interwoven with numerous other stories, the strike changed the way people looked at each other and talked to each other. As the narrator observes, the strike caused townspeople to take sides and begin to target individuals such as Mary McDonald as the source of the tension in the town. "In an interview on TV," for instance, "Cheryl Hughes, a woman whom Mary had always liked, whose husband prepared Mary and George's tax returns, said, 'If you ask me, it's an outrage. Let's just hope nobody dies. Those women ought to be ashamed.'"

Such tensions ripple through the town, captured in Warren Booth's scowl and in the struggle of Mary's own son George Jr. to reconcile his mother's battle for equity and respect with his own loyalty to the local football team and to his star receiver, who also happens to be the son of the hospital's chairman of the board. As Mary tries to explain to her son, the world is evolving and old certainties, like new contracts, are open to renegotiation: "Out in the world," Mary observes, "where I work—well, let's just say that Warren's dad isn't my teammate." As Mary's one-time and now-dead nemesis, Sister Rosa, confirms when she speaks to Mary in the last moment of the nurse's life, the fight

was, in the end, necessary and progressive. “Workers have to fight,” Sister Rosa states succinctly. “The whole system depends on it.”

The Power of Memories

Memory provides a holistic view of Mary’s life, taking into account not only the political activism that so many people in town define her by, but expanding outwards to give readers a sense of her other passions (her family and the New York Giants football team), her faith, and her politics both before and after the strike. Memory, in this sense, never allows Mary (or the reader) to find a single angle from which to view her life and the decisions that shaped it. At any point in the story, a once-stable memory can be frayed by another version of the same story within a different episode. When the proud mother recollects her son’s finest moment on the football field, for instance, she is creating, briefly, a fond memory that is put slightly askew later in the same episode by her remembering that the year of the catch was also the year of the strike. Her original memory is twisted in another direction a bit later in the story when her son steps forward to educate his mother about how her activism is affecting his preparations for a coming game. With memory, in other words, comes diverse perspectives within Mary’s own reflections on her life, which is, as her memory underscores again and again, a work in perpetual progress.

Style

Point of View

The omniscient third-person narrator of “A Nurse’s Story” is free to take on the perspective of any character, regardless of the time or place in which that character lives. The narrator is god-like in his ability to look into the mind of every character and to communicate to readers private motivations, desires, and thoughts. Readers discover, for instance, that Warren Booth Jr. still harbors deep resentment because of the strike’s negative impact on his family and on his own preparation for an important football game. Moreover, the narrator is free to articulate and, even comment on, the limitations of Warren’s own understanding of past events and of himself, as when the narrator notes that “[t]he fact that [Warren] himself has never managed any great enterprise did not occur to him” or later when he debates with himself whether to attend Mary McDonald’s funeral. His decision, never spoken but accessible to the narrator (and through him to the reader), speaks volumes about the humanity of one of the town’s leading men: “Forget the funeral. Send a card.”

Episodic Structure and Lack of Chronology

“A Nurse’s Story” is structured as a series of episodes that move fluidly across the history of Mary McDonald’s life. Although each episode can stand alone as a component of the story, it is more important to see them as interdependent units, with each memory shaping the one that came before and after. Characters appear and reappear in new contexts, as connections between the various aspects of Mary’s life reveal themselves, allowing patterns to form and reform as the story unfolds. Reading Baida’s story is like living a life, an exercise that involves both a rethinking of each experience gained over the years and a rereading of the entire story with the maturity that comes over time.

Historical Context

Women's Rights and Political Change

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of remarkable political and cultural unrest in the United States, as young adults questioned vigorously their government's foreign policies and indifference to deeply rooted inequalities at home. As had been the case in the late nineteenth century, when female suffrage was in the forefront of political debates, women mobilized dramatically in support of civil rights, antiwar and antipoverty issues, and labor movements. Many of the younger women of the era subscribed to a new feminism that focused on gender discriminations in employment, education, sexual conduct (culminating in the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* abortion ruling of 1973), and family-based issues. Older and more moderate women were behind the formation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966. Under the leadership of noted feminist and activist Betty Friedan (1921–2006), the organization focused on a number of gender-related issues and the process known as consciousness raising in which individuals discuss inequities to become more aware of what has been tacit and covert.

With regards to the types and degrees of employment equity issues explored in Baida's "A Nurse's Story," the first big challenges to sex discrimination in the early sixties came from wage-earning women who had continued to secure factory work after the gender-breaking boom that accompanied World War II. After the war, women stayed in the workforce during marriage and even after the birth of their children.

Linking their own concerns with those being raised by civil rights activists, advocates from the labor movements scored a major coup in 1965 when the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) began to deal officially with complaints concerning inequities in wages, sex-biased recruitment policies and promotion, and substandard working conditions. (The first chairperson of the commission was Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.) In the first year alone, more than two thousand complaints were filed with the commission from working women from all classes, races, and ethnic backgrounds. Such efforts were brought to public awareness by media that covered discriminatory employment practices and women's struggles to raise consciousness regarding them.

Health Care and the Catholic Church

Historically, the Catholic Church has been a significant influence in both the business and the philosophy of health care in the United States, especially in the care that is delivered in hospitals. The mandate of such hospitals has remained clearly focused: to offer substantive health care in accord with the example set out in the life and actions of Christ. This commitment is expressed in practical terms, as Baida's story highlights, in a dedication to providing care for those who are impoverished and most in need.

Extending the definition of health care to include the social terms and conditions of an individual's wellbeing, Catholic hospitals are equally committed to changing the conditions that lead to a decline in health. They are dedicated to the common good. Accordingly, these organizations examine the causes not just the symptoms of poverty and raise questions about the accessibility of health services and discrimination in health care delivery. Although Catholic hospitals have been configured under their own direction as a private, not-for-profit enterprise, they have been forced by the Church and by others to rethink their mandate in the modern world, which includes the need to review their philosophy on such issues as contraception, reproductive technologies, and labor practices. In 2006, the debate over unionization of Catholic hospitals continued in the pages of such widely read publications as the *National Catholic Reporter* and *U.S. Catholic*.

Critical Overview

Although not widely reviewed in the year of its release, Peter Baida's collection *A Nurse's Story and Others* was very well received by those critics who did review it. As Aoibheann Sweeney notes in the *New York Times*: "Baida . . . is not a sucker for happy endings. The nine stories in his posthumous collection are about the kinds of characters—nurses, patients, old unionists and old friends—who make mistakes they cannot fix and confront questions they cannot resolve." Jeff Zaleski of *Publishers Weekly* concurs with this suggestion that Baida's stories are open-ended. Zaleski concludes that Baida's "stories offer no grand epiphanies, no tidy resolutions—but they address complicated issues of loyalty, class, race, ethics and family in a spare, direct style that is insightful and moving."

Although critics tended toward plot summary of the stories rather than extensive praise for any single one, their comments are consistently directed at celebrating Baida's humanity. In the end, as Sweeney concludes, Baida's only collection does what the most carefully crafted fiction should do: it "leaves us not with a more comfortable sense of the world's injustices but with a keener one." Though assessments of Baida's work are few, the collection was highly recommended as part of Ellie Barta-Moran's listing of adult fiction in *Booklist*.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In the following essay, he explores the dynamics and politics of Mary McDonald's retrospective reading of the town of Booth's Landing.

Peter Baida's "A Nurse's Story" is written in an episodic style that accentuates the links between the remembered episodes that constitute Mary McDonald's fragmented life review. At the same time, the story illuminates the layers of stories that come from the history of a small town. Openings and closings accumulate slowly in the story, turning "A Nurse's Story" into a kind of archaeological site within which layers of memory blend together, making reading the story a process of sifting through and reordering events. In Mary's story, connections are made retrospectively through an awareness of what is to come and which aspects will assume significance and which others will not.

Hers is a dying lived in retrospect, a journey away from the known and the knowable to the illuminating edges of open secrets and whispered pasts.

With its nonlinear style of storytelling, "A Nurse's Story" generates a form that is ideally suited for exploring the external and internal forces that have gathered over time to crisscross the spiritual and emotional foundations of Booth's Landing. Never really challenged by the threat of an advancing urban sprawl or by economic downturns or factory collapses, town is split instead by tensions between its history and its present, two threads that come together in the life and the story of Mary McDonald.

The story of Mary's transformation from passive Catholic nurse to confident political activist is also the story of one woman's struggle to establish connections, a word that Baida never actually uses in his story but which resonates through each episode Mary remembers. In large part, this search consists of Mary's movement toward understanding how experiences link people's lives. Like life itself, Mary's journey is uncertain, but she comes to appreciate and even celebrate the ambiguities in what she has long considered the knowable, ordinary events of the town.

At the beginning of her career, for instance, Mary was forced to deal with Clarice Hunter, a woman who is, in many ways, a mirror-image of Mary herself. World-weary, physically and emotionally exhausted, on the one hand, Clarice is, on the other, "a jewel" and "a blessing" of a nurse whose genuine humanity connects her to her patients. Clarice is especially connected to Mary's grandmother, who called for her nurse not her family to comfort her in her dying moments:

Mary called Clarice, who came to the hospital at two in the morning. At three, Mary's grandmother fell asleep with her mouth wide open. At six, with a terrifying snort, she

woke and died. Clarice helped the night nurse wash the body. Then she worked the day shift.

Through her early contact with Clarice, who badgers her about her Catholic passivity and political neutrality, Mary began to sense that there are worlds and realities lying alongside the one she knows. At times, these are troubling worlds in which unanswerable questions about value and worth are asked regularly and with passion. These worlds often offer themselves as enlightening complements to the reality of Mary's life at the hospital. The world of Ida Peterson, for instance, gave Mary her first real experience with blood and with the strength of a woman determined to die with dignity. The aging Mary vividly remembers Ida's death: "She still remembers the splash of blood on her face when she stepped into Mrs. Petersen's room. She still remembers how long it took Mrs. Petersen to die."

Still other of these worlds appear to Mary (and to the reader) like objects viewed in a fun-house mirror, generally recognizable but marked by a darkened, almost surreal difference. The briefly recounted story of Laura Seybold, for instance, lingers in Mary's mind with its central image of a young woman, "the life . . . out of her eyes," wandering "through town with a bleak, dazed, shell-shocked look on her face" as she heads home one Saturday night to swallow "every pill in the house." Or, later, the story of Eunice Barnacle's mother, who bails her abusive boyfriend out of jail so that she can murder him with a shotgun, an act that gains her both a life sentence at Sing Sing Prison and a place in town's expanding lore.

As she moves from episode to episode, Mary gradually comes to see for the first time the fissures in the peacefulness of Booth's Landing. At one extreme lies the world of the masculine and the powerful, symbolized by the omnipresence of the town's most prominent families, the Booths and Tiesslers, whose connections reach back to the Revolutionary War period. "In every generation," as Mary acknowledges, "for as long as anyone can remember, the Booths and the Tiesslers have been the town's leading families" as well as the foundations of its economic fortunes. Seen from this angle, Booth's Landing is a world of banks and factories, of civic pride and philanthropic gesture, and of football heroics that figure in local mythologies.

At the other extreme is an ever-expanding community of disenfranchised women that begins to arrange itself around the local hospital and that eventually fractures the town with its push for union certification. "For six months, the nurses carried picket signs outside the hospital," Mary recalls. "Twenty nurses, on the picket line, every day and into the night." She recalls how local residents were divided about the strike, how many of them scorned the nurses and how hard it was to persist.

Yet beneath the surface of this apparently split world, as beneath the surface of all the worlds Mary touches, circulates a rich diversity of opinions and attitudes toward love and sex, faith and religion, wisdom and knowledge. In this sense, "A Nurse's Story" is arranged as a series of questions that Mary faces: questions of love, sexuality, power, mortality, and spirituality, all of which culminate in her experience with political activism.

What Mary gradually understands is that no experience or person exists in isolation. She comes to sense the insufficiency of any of these other worlds to synthesize fully the complexities she recognizes as essential to her own sense of truth. For her, each world is incomplete and rigidly exclusive rather than cumulative and inclusive. With each new experience and story, Mary also gains understanding of the different strategies others use to organize their reality, to piece together their own memories.

The story ends with Mary sensing, but not understanding fully, the meaning in the visit of the ghostly Sister Rosa and of Mary's long-dead husband's sudden youthfulness, as he re-enters her story with "hair . . . the color of fresh corn" and his clarinet held between "fingers . . . as thick as cigars." She finally understands that each story she set out to tell inevitably spirals outward to include other stories told by other people. These other stories appear in various forms and stages of completion. They are allusive, metaphoric, or nostalgic. Moreover, these other stories are often contradictory, equally believable visions and revisions of a single event; the layering of stories produces what Mary herself recognizes as a system of stories circulating within and around her. Hers is a dying lived in retrospect, a journey away from the known and the knowable to the illuminating edges of open secrets and whispered pasts.

In this sense, "A Nurse's Story" is a richly patterned fiction about the need to structure subjective experiences through the complex act of fiction making. Mary's maturing corresponds with her accumulation and transcendence of storytelling. It is a story, too, in which the reader is implicated, made aware of the assumptions (cultural, historical, and ideological) that limit the way Mary reads the people and worlds around her. How the aging nurse reads the various "texts" of her existence comes to reflect on how readers approach the story of Mary's life, a reminder of people's need for clarity and order and for the meaning that comes through reading.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on "A Nurse's Story," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she explores the meaning of a "good death" in the context of a life well-lived and how people are remembered after they die in "A Nurse's Story."

"A Nurse's Story," by Peter Baida, reflects upon the life and death of nurse Mary McDonald, who is dying from colon cancer. Mary is content with her life and calm in the face of death; indeed she knows too much about her condition because of her training as a nurse to be mistaken about the deterioration of her body. Mary knows that everybody wants a "good death," but she is unsure what that really means. For Ida Peterson, a good death meant a "natural death," which Mrs. Peterson believed meant she would die peacefully with her husband nearby. This is not the death that Mrs. Peterson got because she actually died from a ruptured artery. Frightened, Mrs. Peterson died covered in her own blood, clutching Mary's hand, a nurse she barely knew. In the face of her own imminent death, Mary chooses instead to focus on her life, a life that was well-lived and fulfilling in its own quiet way.

. . . Mary lived as well as the good death she is granted, reunited with her loving husband and all regrets in life settled.

Mary lived her entire life in Booth's Landing, a small town on the Hudson River in New York State. "You can do worse than to live and die in a place like Booth's Landing," and Mary indeed refuses to go with her son George to Chicago or anywhere else in her last months because she wants to die in Booth's Landing. Mary married George, a gentle man who loved to play clarinet and taught music at the local high school. They were married thirty-nine years and had three children together before George died. On their second date, Mary assured George that "there's more to life than money" after he told her that he would like to live in Booth's Landing for the rest of his life and teach clarinet. He said, "I don't think I'll ever make much money. . . . I've never cared much about it." At the time in which "A Nurse's Story" takes place, George has been dead eight years but is never far from Mary's thoughts. She misses him deeply and remembers with affection how he was a good father to their children and passionate about playing his clarinet. Their love, like their lives, was quiet and thorough.

Mary had no hobbies. After her love for her family, the New York Giants, and dark beer, she poured all of her passion into nursing. Nursing is part technical know-how (managing medicines, operating hospital machinery, and following procedure) and part personal touch (soothing people through pain and fear, being strong for others when they are weak, and having compassion). Mary touched the lives of many people in Booth's Landing, often seeing people at their lowest moments. For example, the doctor caring for her, Dr. Tom Seybold, is the son of Laura Seybold, a patient Mary nursed after a suicide attempt following her second miscarriage, before she and her husband

conceived Tom. Mary was considered by her colleagues and neighbors to be a good nurse; people called her for medical advise before they called their physician. “She knew things that only nurses know.” But Mary was not the only good nurse in Booth’s Landing. When Mary’s grandmother was dying from colon cancer, Mary’s friend Clarice Hunter was the nurse on duty. Mary’s grandmother was so touched by Clarice’s careful ministrations that she insisted on having Clarice at her bedside in the last hours of her life, just as if Clarice were another member of her family. “This woman is a jewel. . . . This woman is a blessing,” Mary’s grandmother explained. Mary’s grandmother, one could argue, also had a good death, eased by the care of an excellent nurse. Mary recognizes the ephemeral qualities of a good nurse in Eunice Barnacle, her attending nurse at Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center.

Mary’s life was, by her choice, relatively uneventful. Her participation in the 1967 nurses’ union strike was her one deviation from everything the world expected of her. Mary’s participation in the formation of the union in 1965 and the subsequent strike was important to the other nurses who held her opinion in high regard—“if you talked to other nurses, you found out that Mary’s opinion made a difference.” Baida never explains why this is, but the reader is left with the sense that Mary’s steady sensibilities and skill as a nurse earned her the respect of her peers. The strike overall was a dramatic event in the history of the town: nurse Beverly Wellstone on a hunger strike lasting thirty-three days; Warren Booth Jr. and George Jr. stressed about the strife between their parents during an important high school championship football game; Sister Rosa bringing in scab nurses to cross the picket lines; striking nurses praying outside the hospital in the dead of winter; and Mary standing proudly with her coworkers despite the comments made by her neighbors. Mary, after all, had dedicated her life to caring for other people’s health, and this union put her social and professional life on the line. It was a gamble, but the rewards were an investment in the well-being of the nurses and, by extension, the patients. The irony is that some people, like Carl Usher or Cheryl Hughes, were affronted at the idea of the nurses striking because they felt that patients were being neglected. Cheryl said: “Let’s just hope nobody dies. Those women ought to be ashamed.” These people never looked more closely at the issue and understood that the nurses were picketing, in part, to improve patient care.

What Mary and others remember about the strike is that it lasted over three months and took a stranger coming into their small town—an emissary from the cardinal—to bring the strike to conclusion. With the union officially recognized, Mary and her colleagues were able to earn a fairer wage and better staffing. In the long term, the union would also give the hospital’s nurses an avenue by which they could get any other needed changes.

Mary did not regret her participation in the union, and it did not alter her conservative political and economic convictions. Eunice sees that the union is not doing much for Mary now that she is sick and dying, but Mary knows the union is important for other reasons because she urges Eunice to unionize the nurses at the Booth-Tiessler Geriatric Center. Just as Mary and Clarice once did, Eunice and her coworkers debate the possibility of a union for the Geriatric Center nurses. Just as Mary was reluctant to become a “troublemaker,” so do some of Eunice’s coworkers refuse to get involved.

Trouble is sometimes what is needed to oust complacency. One of the defining points the nurses then and now come around on is the question of whether they are being paid what they are worth. Nurses are highly skilled and often work in intense environments, caring for multiple patients and working long shifts to ensure continuity of care. Eunice knows, as Mary long ago determined, that self-respect is worth fighting for.

Baida is illustrating how some aspects of human nature and patterns in history are continual, but they are perhaps rarely observed in their entirety by individuals caught in the midst of events. A minor era is passing with Mary's death, but the seeds of the next generation of nurses—Eunice and her burgeoning union at the Geriatric Center and Mary's daughter Jane who is an exhausted nurse and mother of two wrestling with alcoholism. Mary's son George Jr. is a reflection of his father—large, quiet, and earnest. Brad is Mary and George's wild card, the prodigy with a successful job far away from Booth's Landing. All of Mary's children come home to be with their mother when her health takes a permanent turn for the worse, and it is clear that there is real affection between her and her children. Mary is succumbing to colon cancer just like her grandmother did almost forty years earlier. She has had her entire life to prepare for the possibility of this inherited disease; the cancer is, again, inoperable and unavoidable. With the bulk of her happy life behind her, Mary takes on her impending death tranquilly.

Mary's memories of her life and the author's description of the ongoing activity in the town after her death demonstrate Baida's sense that life in a small town is like a "tightly spun" web. Everyone is connected, sometimes indirectly or invisibly. Richard Dill, former town reporter and Mary's neighbor at the Geriatric Center, watches her fade away and remembers how she cared for his wife Jennifer after surgery. After Mary dies, Warren Booth Jr. remembers her in the context of the nurses' strike which disrupted his family and his football season. He selfishly assigns blame to Mary for making him unhappy almost thirty years earlier, but his own lack of compassion is a strong contrast with Mary's personality and reflects poorly upon him. He thinks to himself, "What great enterprise had they ever managed?" The irony, of course, is that nurses deal with life and death every day whereas Warren Booth Jr. grew up in a privileged family and inherited his job from his father. "The fact that he had never managed any great enterprise did not occur to him." Roger Dill, son of Richard, who reported on the nurses' strike, doesn't remember Mary's effect on his life. He is bored and indifferent as he writes up a standard obituary for Mary, oblivious of the knowledge that Mary was the nurse who cared for his mother twenty years ago. Nick Santino, the undertaker, lovingly prepares Mary's body, cognizant of how carefully, tenderly Mary cared for his own mother when she was dying. He is sad to see that Mary has died. Sister Margaret, the current hospital administrator, remembers Mary as a "*damned* good nurse"—a strong compliment coming from a nun and also significant considering that Sister Margaret and Mary, as employer and employee, had their "differences."

Mary's one lingering regret as she lay dying is that she disappointed the formidable Sister Rosa, who was hospital administrator during the union strike. Mary laments: "Oh, Sister Rosa, how I admired you! How I hated doing anything that might displease you. How I wanted you to *like* me." Sister Rosa was strict and held everyone to a high standard. She was also extremely stubborn and held out (along with the chairman of the

board Warren Booth) against the striking nurses until the cardinal intervened. In her last days Mary is visited by the deceased Sister Rosa in a vision. Sister Rosa assures Mary that she did not take the strike personally and is actually glad that it happened. Sister Rosa says: “Workers have to fight. . . . The whole system depends on it.” Reassured, Mary wakes and talks to her children one last time before slipping into unconsciousness where she is greeted by her late husband George. She has missed him so much, and the sight of him gladdens her heart. “The smile on his face made Mary want to get up and throw her arms around his neck.” “A Nurse’s Story” illustrates the good life that Mary lived as well as the good death she is granted, reunited with her loving husband and all regrets in life settled.

“A good death. That’s what everyone wants.” A good death is defined by the life that was lived, the impact he or she had, and by what people remember of that person. A good death cannot be simply defined by how or why a person is dying. Baida leaves his readers with the sense that Mary’s death was a good one—despite the fact that she has suffered from colon cancer—because she has lived a happy life, has had the respect of her peers and the unconditional love of her family. In the embrace of her community, Mary does not fear death. Her compassionate care as a nurse has touched many of her neighbors, some of whom are not aware of how Mary impacted their lives, but Mary did not give of herself because she expected anything in return. Like Clarice Hunter said when caring for Mary’s grandmother, “Just doing my job.” Most of the people who do remember Mary’s gentle strength remember her with pride, respect, and perhaps a little awe.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on “A Nurse’s Story,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Bussey holds a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she considers how Peter Baida reveals the nurses' strike as the defining moment in Mary McDonald's life in "A Nurse's Story."

Peter Baida's O. Henry award-winning "A Nurse's Story" is the story of a dying nurse, Mary McDonald. Baida takes the reader on a journey through Mary's past and present. During her last three days of life, Mary is in a room in a geriatric hospital. She passes the time reflecting on the past, talking to her nurse about starting a union, and preparing herself for the death she knows is imminent. As Baida guides the reader through numerous episodes of Mary's life, the reader comes to know her—and her community—well. It soon becomes apparent that the defining moment in Mary's life was a nurses' strike in 1967, an event that forced Mary to take a stand despite creating division in her close-knit community.

Baida makes it clear that her past involvement in a union and a subsequent strike was pivotal in Mary's life. Seventeen of the mini-chapters in the story relate directly or indirectly to Mary's union involvement.

Baida's narrative style is unique and effective. The short story is essentially divided into thirty-one mini-chapters, about half of which relate to Mary's past. The overall effect is realistic; Mary is fully aware she is in the last days of her life, and her mind wanders naturally from the past to the present. Her interactions with the people around her are calm and devoid of the panic or terror other patients might feel at the prospect of dying soon. Perhaps because she has been a nurse her whole adult life, Mary made her peace with death long ago. Her love for her husband is deep and abiding, and she is comforted in the knowledge that she will see him soon. But she is not one to waste away her last days of influence. She encourages her son to lose weight and take better care of himself, and she tries to convince her nurse, Eunice, to pursue a union for herself and the other geriatric nurses.

The issue of the union dominates Mary's thoughts and words during her time in the hospital. Baida makes it clear that her past involvement in a union and a subsequent strike was pivotal in Mary's life. Seventeen of the mini-chapters in the story relate directly or indirectly to Mary's union involvement. The reader gets the first taste of this when Mary is talking to Eunice about how hard nurses' work is and how little they are paid. Eunice is resistant to the idea of a union, but then, so was Mary at first. As the story unfolds, the reader understands that Mary had always been against unions until her own professional life seemed hopeless. In 1965, she and the other nurses felt overworked, underpaid, and unheard. To the surprise of her coworkers, she ultimately decided to vote for the union. Now, Eunice is the one who is reluctant to pursue a union,

and Mary knows how she feels. Toward the end of the story, Eunice remembers Mary commenting that unions had their good sides and their bad sides. Unfortunately, Mary dies before Eunice has the chance to ask her about it again. Eunice thinks to herself that now, she will never know what Mary would have said. But the reader and Eunice know that Mary would have given both sides, only to conclude that unions are good for nurses. Her insistence that Eunice consider it is evidence of that. Eunice may not get the details from Mary, but her position is made clear. There is a scene in which Eunice is talking to a friend about the possibility of pursuing a union. It is reminiscent of Mary's past, when she turned from reluctance to endorsement. Eunice was opposed to the idea of a union when Mary first talked to her about it, but in this scene, she tries to convince another woman that it might be a good idea after all. Both Mary and Eunice love nursing and want to give their patients the best, which requires better working conditions.

Mary (when she was younger) and Eunice have something else in common—they need to make as much money as they can to support their families. Mary's husband was a music teacher who knew he would never make much money; Eunice is a single parent of a three-year-old. They both have practical needs to meet in their jobs, as well as personal ones. Baida tells the reader enough about Mary's past and personality that her love for nursing and nurses is undeniable. Apparently Mary had no hobbies or social groups. She loved football, beer, and nursing. In fact, she passed her love of nursing to her only daughter, who also enters the profession. This insight into Mary's heart is important because it gives significance to the way she talks to Eunice about unions and being the best nurse she can be.

When people are dying, the most significant people and events return to their thoughts. In many cases, people are plagued with guilt and regret. But in Mary's case, she lingers on her relationship to the nurses' union back in the 1960s. Why? As Baida slowly reveals, joining a union is initially contrary to Mary's nature, and her coworkers know it. Mary is also influential among her peers at the hospital, so the other nurses are interested in where she will land on the issue. When she changes her mind and decides to support the union, it is not just a hot topic among her peers, it marks a turning point for Mary. Rather than adhere to her existing views and beliefs, she takes into account how the issue particularly relates to her and her fellow nurses' work situation. She opens her mind and ultimately changes it. That the other nurses knew enough about her politics to know she would likely oppose a union demonstrates that Mary was outspoken about her views. This makes her willingness to change her mind a particularly strong indicator about the nature of her character.

Once the union was formed, it was not easy. Only two years later, the union decided to go on strike, complete with picketing and media attention. Her participation in the strike cemented Mary's commitment to the union. As a striker, she faced the disapproval and rejection of friends and other people she respected. She even had to strike the hospital owner's home, despite the fact that her son George and the owner's son were teammates on the football team. The whole union experience, then, represented a time in her life when Mary took a public stand for which she could *not* be universally popular in her community. It is little wonder she would reflect on this time in her final days. The memories are vivid, and they are both empowering and defeating. But her commitment

to the union was really a commitment to herself and the other nurses at the hospital. Now, on her deathbed, she is in a hospital being cared for by a nurse she likes and respects. Her heart returns to that time of camaraderie, and she wants Eunice to have the ability to be the best nurse—and mother—she can be.

Mary's involvement in the strike continues to affect her life through the attitudes of other people in the community. Even now when she is sixty-nine, her association with that strike defines the way some people in the community think of her. As he reads her obituary, Warren Booth remembers little else about her than her holding a picket sign in front of his house all those years ago. Warren had been George's teammate, and when she picketed his father's house, it affected him as a teenager. He feels no sadness at her death and no real feelings of sadness for George, either. He toys with the idea of going to the funeral with a "why not?" attitude, but ultimately decides that he will just send a card to George. His lingering hostility is based solely on Mary's involvement in the strike decades ago. Similarly, Sister Margaret (who took over for Sister Rosa as the hospital's executive director) is sad to hear that Mary has died, although she hastens to add that she and Mary had their differences. Sister Margaret was not even the executive director at the time of the strike, yet her compassion for Mary is accompanied by a twinge of resentment over her union activities.

To other members of the community, however, Mary's identity as a union member is secondary to her identity as a caring and skilled nurse. At the funeral home, Mary's body is prepared by two men, one of whom is Nick Santino. Nick tells the other man that he is sad to see Mary go because he remembers how she took care of his mother in the hospital. He does not just remember that she attended to his mother's basic needs; he remembers how she washed her feet, even using a toothbrush to clean her toes. What Nick does not know is that Mary wanted to provide that level of detailed care to all her patients and that only through the met demands of the union for more staff could she provide it. Readers may recall a previous passage in which Mary and another nurse are physically and emotionally drained by having as many as twenty patients. It is fair to infer that Nick's mother was admitted to the hospital after the strike and after more staff were hired.

The ripples of the strike go out to people who do not even realize that their lives are affected by it. For some, like Warren and Sister Margaret, the effects are negative, but for countless others, like Nick, they are positive and unforgettable. If Mary had been alive to hear Nick's story, it would have only affirmed her difficult decision to commit to the nurses' union. That turning point in her life made possible the legacy she wanted as a nurse who cared for her patients in a way that mattered.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "A Nurse's Story," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Write two or three more episodes that might be included in Baida's story, focusing in your original writing on the perspectives of characters other than Mary McDonald. You might consider, for instance, writing from the point of view of Eunice Barnacle or Dr. Tom Seybold. Alternatively, you might look to other members of the town who come in contact with Mary during the course of her life, such as Nick Santino or Laura Seybold.

• Recalling Mary's story of the picket lines and the slogans that appeared on the signs that the nurses carried, do some research into the history of slogans of this sort. Think of possible situations in which such sayings might prove useful: marking support for a football team or a political candidate, for instance, or during a labor dispute of some sort. Build a catalogue of possible slogans, noting as well the context in which you think each would be most effective.

• Research the history of the debate over unions within the Catholic hospital system. Prepare a series of newspaper editorials based on these facts. Be sure that some of your opinion pieces support the union effort and that others support the rights of the hospitals to function without unions as part of their business plans.

• Draw a tourist map of Booth's Landing as you might imagine it to look from the details of the story. Be sure to include brief descriptions and histories of the most important landmarks, as well as a couple of paragraphs recounting the history of settlement.

What Do I Read Next?

- Margaret Edson's play, *Wit*, portrays a professor of metaphysical poetry, especially the work of John Donne, who struggles to accept the inevitability of her own death after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer. A scathing commentary on the ethos of medical intervention driven by the imperatives of research rather than care, the play traces, too, the friendship between the dying scholar and her attending nurse. *Wit* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1999 and was adapted into a 2001 television movie, starring Emma Thompson.

- Another strong-willed woman is portrayed by Margaret Laurence in her novel *The Stone Angel* (1964). Ninety-year-old Hagar Shipley remembers her life on the Canadian frontier and the disintegration of her marriage, and nearing the end of her life, she faces failing physical and mental health.

- Clara Bingham and Laura Leady Gansler's *Class Action: The Story of Lois Jenson and the Landmark Case that Changed Sexual Harassment* (2002) is an account of an important case in the evolution of sexual harassment laws in the United States. The book tells the true story of the injustices and personal humiliation faced by a small group of women who went to work the iron mines of northern Minnesota. This book was the inspiration for the 2005 movie, *North Country*, directed by Niki Caro and starring Charlize Theron.

- Football as both literary device and metaphor for small-town culture is captured in Buzz Bissinger's 1990 novel, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream*. Tracing the trials and successes of a high school football team in the small, economically depressed town of Odessa, Texas, the novel underscores both the advantages and disadvantages of a culture in which sports teams and athletes are seen as saviors and superstars. The novel was adapted into the 2004 movie *Friday Night Lights*, directed by Peter Berg and starring Billy Bob Thornton.

Further Study

Goodman-Draper, Jacqueline, *Health Care's Forgotten Majority: Nurses and their Frayed White Collars*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995.

Speaking to the dynamics of a healthcare debate that has historically overlooked the political and fiscal well-being of patients and front-line workers as part of its implicit strategy, this book deals with one important group that is most often overlooked: nurses. Although addressed to a professional audience, this study does foreground many of the same issues raised by Baida in "A Nurse's Story" while at the same time exploring the nursing population as a more complex and politically dynamic community than it might appear to the casual observer.

Kelly, David F., *Medical Care at the End of Life: A Catholic Perspective*, Georgetown University Press, 2006.

Having worked with healthcare professionals for more than three decades, Kelly has confronted many difficult, often painful issues that concern medical treatment at the end of life. Here, he outlines succinctly many major issues regarding end-of-life care as understood within the traditions of Catholic medical ethics.

Nelson, Siobhan, and Suzanne Gordan, *The Complexities of Care: Nursing Reconsidered*, Cornell University Press, 2006.

Written for a general audience, this collection of essays provokes a rethinking of many assumptions that continue to inform both popular and political thinking about nurses and the nursing profession. Many of the essays included here warn of the dangers of oversimplified images of nursing.

Rosen, Ruth, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, Penguin, 2001.

Popular historian Ruth Rosen chronicles the trajectory of the American women's movement from its beginnings in the 1960s to the late twentieth century. Interweaving personal stories with political analysis, she remembers the events and the people who defined this social revolution. Working with resources from archives, traditional research, and personal interviews, Rosen invites readers to appreciate the impact of the women's movement and to agree with her argument that the need for attention to these issues is far from over.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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