Off the Map Study Guide

Off the Map by Joan Ackermann

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Contents

Introduction

The play's title comes from the location where the Groden family lives in northern New Mexico. The family is so far removed from any sense of conventional society that they live almost completely "off the map." With *Off the Map*, Ackermann constructs a memory play in which Adult Bo Groden reflects back upon one summer of her childhood. During this summer, Young Bo, an eleven-year old girl, lives with her mother and father, Arlene and Charley. Other than Charley's friend, George, the family has little contact with the outside world. During this summer, Charley falls into a deep depression that challenges the Groden family. An unlikely visitor, William Gibbs, arrives at their doorstep to collect on back taxes. Gibbs is also suffering from depression and quickly develops a distant, unspoken bond with Charley. Strangely, Gibbs falls in love with the Grodens and their lifestyle, never returning to his life "on the map." Beyond the sad, funny, and heartwarming moments, the Groden family and Gibbs share during the summer's struggle with individual demons and depression, Ackermann is also able to use the memory play to question the differing freedoms Bo experiences both as a young girl and an adult banker.

Author Biography

Joan Ackermann, a contemporary American playwright, is one of the freshest voices in modern theater, so much so that one of her most recent plays has already been filmed and released as a major motion picture. *Off the Map* has won acclaim not only on stage, but also as a film directed by Campbell Scott. The movie starred Joan Allen and Sam Elliott, was screened in competition at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, and then received a limited release around the country in 2004.

Ackermann is also the co-founder and Artistic Director of Mixed Company theatre in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The company has been in existence for 23 years. Ackermann is a prolific playwright and, in addition to *Off the Map*, her many works include *Zara Spook and Other Lures* (1990), *Bed and Breakfast*, *Rescuing Greenland*, and *Isabella: a Young Physician's Primer on the Perils of Love*. *Isabella: a Young Physician's Primer on the Perils of Love* is a musical for which Ackermann wrote the music and lyrics. Ackermann's plays have been produced by a host of prestigious houses, such as Vineyard Theatre, Circle Rep, and the Atlantic Theatre Company.

Biographical information about Ackermann is elusive at best. However, her writing precedes her, and her writing repertoire is impressively extensive and diverse. In addition to her stage and film work, she has written and produced for television. She is also a special contributor to *Sports Illustrated*, and she freelances for *The Atlantic*, *Audubon*, *GQ*, and *New York Magazine*.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scenes 1—6

The play opens with the narrator, Adult Bo Groden. She introduces us to herself as an eleven-year old child living *off the map* in northern New Mexico. Young Bo is a sassy, intelligent, determined young girl. She is creative, often writing letters to large companies, complaining about products and demanding free samples. Charley, her father, is experiencing an oppressive bout with depression. The man is always crying, not sobbing: tears are constantly draining from his eyes. Arlene, her mother, is a strong, stable woman who is able to support the family through Charley's debilitating depression. Adult Bo also introduces us to Charley's friend, George, a large, quiet man with a deep dedication to the Grodens.

Young Bo quickly expresses her desire to leave her life off the map. She plans to achieve her goal by applying for an American Express credit card so she can, "buy a one-way ticket out of this hell hole." Although the Grodens rarely receive mail outside of Bo's free samples, they receive a letter stating that they are being audited. Arlene finds the prospect amusing because the family makes less than five thousand dollars a year.

Charley's depression is taking a toll on Arlene, Bo and George. Everyone wants to help him and he wants to help himself, but they are at a loss. Charley has given way to endorsing physical pain, willingly pulling his own diseased tooth. He relishes the discomfort because at least the pain allows him to feel something. Arlene finally asks George to go to town and visit a psychiatrist. She knows the doctor will not give George medicine for Charley, so she asks him to pretend he has depression. George agrees to go see the psychiatrist because he is willing to do anything to help his friend.

A few days after George visits the psychiatrist, George and Bo go fishing. During their outing, Bo asks George a lot of questions about banking, account numbers, and social security numbers, foreshadowing Bo's application for an American Express credit card. George reads her questions as curiosity and answers all of Bo's questions. During their discussion, George also talks about visiting the psychiatrist and that he must return for several more counseling sessions before the doctor will prescribe any medications.

Bo continues her dedication to writing companies, demanding freebies. She writes Hostess stating that the Twinkie samples they sent "contained what I can only describe as a rodent part. Internal organ or foot, I'm not sure." Bo's letter to Hostess confirms her sassy, sneaky sensibilities and supports the view of her as a young, creative con artist.

Act 1, Scenes 7—15

In scene seven, William Gibbs, the IRS agent sent to audit the Grodens, arrives at their home. The family lives so far off the map that Gibbs arrives on foot. He has parked his car many miles away and has trekked through the desert to find their home. Upon his

arrival, he spots Arlene gardening in the nude. Startled, Gibbs screams and turns his back out of respect. However, Arlene is unabashed with her nakedness. With his back turned, Gibbs explains that he is an IRS agent sent to audit the Grodens and Arlene invites him inside.

Once inside, Bo is upset that her mother is naked and demands that Arlene put on some clothes. The young girl introduces herself to Gibbs as "Cecilia-Rose," claiming that she is just around to help out Charley and Arlene. Gibbs reveals that he's been stung by bees and he begins to feel very weak. He falls into a terrible fever and is left weak and delirious on the family's couch for three days.

During his days on the couch, Charley wakes Gibbs once to give the man water and ask if he has ever been depressed. Gibbs answers, "I've never not been depressed," explaining that he has felt emotionally damaged his entire life. Gibbs tells Charley that his depression started when he was six years old and had returned from school to discover that his mother had committed suicide.

Arlene uses herbs to help ease Gibbs' pain. The man struggles with his allergic reaction, but recovers. Just as Gibbs recovers, Bo receives her credit card from American Express. She keeps it a secret. Although Gibbs has recovered from the stings, Charley is still battling depression. He almost feels worse knowing that Gibbs has depression because he feels that Gibbs has a good reason. The hardest aspect of Charley's depression is his inability to isolate a cause.

Charley leaves a painful pebble in his shoe, again showing the man's endorsement of physical pain to offset his depression. Gibbs shows no indication that he will be leaving soon. He has fallen in love with Arlene and has unearthed a passion for art.

Act 2, Scenes 1—5

Act 2 opens with Arlene trying to convince Charley to take an anti-depressant. George successfully feigned depression and was prescribed the drug. Per Arlene's wishes, George passed the pills on to Charley. Reluctantly, Charley swallows the pill and cracks a giant, fake smile. It is revealed that five weeks have passed since Gibbs' arrival. The man is still staying with the Grodens and he has completed a thirty-one foot watercolor of the ocean's horizon. In addition, it has been settled that the Grodens owe the IRS $1,260.00 in back taxes and penalties.

Adult Bo reads a letter that her younger self wrote to an advice column. The letter reveals that Young Bo is frightened that her father's depression might be contagious and that it may lead to his suicide. During this scene a rifle shot rings out, alarming Bo and Arlene. Gibbs staggers in, covered with blood. The tension is broken when Charley arrives announcing they had shot a bear. Not being a hunter, Gibbs is noticeably shaken. Arlene is also disturbed, both out of fear that her husband had killed himself, and because her young daughter is concerned with and affected by her father's depression. On the other hand, Bo is excited that her letter has been published.

Charley is very agitated and he blames the drugs. George arrives nicely dressed because he is going on a date with a woman named Consuela. Charley wants to wrestle with George because he is searching for some sort of painful release from his depression and his manic reaction to the drugs. George resists, stating that he is meeting someone. Charley throws two glasses of beer on his friend, trying to incite him. Finally, George explodes, but instead of hurting Charley, he simply pins his friend to ground, holding him there until he stops struggling. Once exhausted, Charley relaxes and thanks his friend.

Act 2, Scenes 6—10

The scene opens on Charley's birthday. Bo is upset because George is not in attendance. He has moved to Mexico with Consuela. Bo is devastated. Arlene tries to explain that life is about changes. Eventually, Bo reveals that she has purchased a sailboat for her father with her American Express credit card. Everyone is surprised and no one seems upset. In fact, everyone is amazed and flabbergasted that Bo was able to acquire a credit card. They are nervous about paying for the boat, but for the first time all summer, Charley shows a flash of excitement. In a symbolic transition during this emotional turning point□Charley is showing a glimmer of hope for recovery□it is revealed that Arlene's favorite coyote has been killed. Although Bo killed the coyote, for reasons beyond rationality, Arlene never confronts her daughter. Bo and Arlene bury the coyote together the next day, symbolically laying to rest the weight of the summer.

That night, Gibbs and Charley discuss depression and, more importantly, their individuality. In a shared moment, Gibbs begins to sob, expressing his envy of Charley. Gibbs explains that he sees Charley's life, with his loving wife and daughter, as perfect. With Gibbs's emotional release, Charley's perpetual crying ceases. The two begin their recovery from depression.

Charley is showing dramatic signs of improvement. He has stopped taking the drugs, as they only caused him more mental trauma. Gibbs has moved into a bus on the Groden's property and paints constantly. Arlene is concerned with the American Express bill and the money owed to the IRS, however she is happy because her husband is recovering. For the first time in the play, Charley expresses passion for his wife, admiring her leg. In the end, Charley has recovered; Bo has been able to break away from living off the map, attending a public school; and Arlene has even re-entered society, playing catcher on a softball team. Gibbs continues to paint and live with the Grodens.

With the closing memories, Adult Bo recollects back to Gibbs's mysterious death. He was found lying on his back, arms outstretched, with a sketchbook in one hand and a crayon in the other. He seemed at peace, as he had finally achieved freedom through art. More importantly, he escaped his depression and discovered his individuality. Adult Bo also states that Gibbs became a famous artist posthumously and was able to give back to the Grodens after his death. Although the family felt no debt was owed, a collector purchased Gibbs's thirty-one foot painting of the ocean's horizon for $9,000□enough to pay off the IRS, the American Express bill, and fit Bo with a set of

braces. Adult Bo remembers the painting, thinking that it symbolized life with "the ocean as the past, the sky as the future, and the present as that thin precarious line where both meet, precarious because as we stand there it curves under foot. Ever changing."

Characters

George

George is Charley Groden's best friend and is also considered part of the Groden family by Arlene and Bo. He is a large, strong, quiet man with a charming demeanor. He is an important friend to Bo, especially during her father's terrible and unexpected bout with depression. George is often mistaken for being dull or unintelligent, when in actuality he is a deep thinker. In the early stages of Charley's depression, George gives Arlene a watercolor set and asks her to give it to Charley. George is trying to help motivate his best friend in any way possible. However, George's demeanor does not allow him to express emotion and, thus, he asks Arlene to deliver the paints without mentioning that they are a gift. George's dedication to the Grodens is clear. When Arlene asks George to take Bo fishing because Bo has also been depressed, he does not hesitate. His fraternal love for Charley is highlighted in two major instances. First, George willingly goes to a psychiatrist and pretends to have depression even going as far as a series of counseling sessions to receive an anti-depressant prescription to pass on to Charley. Later, charged with his attempts to combat depression, Charley tries to antagonize George and make the large man hurt him. George resists Charley's prodding, wrestles him to the ground, and restrains Charley until he calms down. Although he is a man of few words, George has a deep love for the Grodens and is a vital support mechanism for their family.

William Gibbs

William Gibbs is an outsider and IRS agent assigned to audit the Grodens. He arrives at their home on foot. The Grodens live far *off the map* in New Mexico, making access to their home difficult. When Gibbs arrives, he is immediately struck by Arlene because she is gardening in the nude. The woman is unabashed and does not flinch or cover up. Immediately, Gibbs is smitten. Oddly, he quickly falls dramatically ill from an allergic reaction to bee stings and is left in the care of the Grodens. The IRS agent spends three days sweating with the fever on the couch. During this time, Gibbs and Charley exchange a few moments of sparse dialogue. Charley talks openly with Gibbs about his depression. Gibbs offsets Charley's bout with depression stating, "I've never not been depressed." These exchanges make Gibbs a crucial character in *Off the Map*.

Not only does Gibbs's character create a reference point for Charley's own depression, it is also echoes Ackermann's quiet support for clinical psychology. Charley needs Gibbs, someone outside of his family and his life, to discuss his mental problems. Following Gibbs's recovery from the bee stings, he continues to reside with the Grodens. He takes up painting and becomes close to Arlene and Bo. Bo is intensely interested in Gibbs because he is from the outside world that she is so motivated to explore. Yet, Gibbs continues to remain slightly distant from Charley. There is no tension between the men and, in fact, they share some of the play's most dramatic dialogue. It

appears that, although Charley does not want to see a psychiatrist, he is interested in and benefits from his counselor-like relationship with Gibbs. Gibbs feels no obligation to this role in Charley's life because he may be unaware of the impact. However, the IRS agent does feel uncomfortable because of his love for Arlene.

Eventually, Gibbs begins using Charley's watercolors and develops an incredible love of painting. He creates spectacular pieces, many of which are paintings and sketches of Arlene in the nude. She does not pose for Gibbs, but a crisp memory of her naked body is obviously burned into his mind, once again supporting his deep, intense love for Arlene. His newfound love of art pulls Gibbs from his own depression. Thus, George's gift has its desired effect, just not on the intended recipient. In his transition out of depression, Gibbs sobs one evening to Charley, telling him that he, Charley, has a perfect and enviable life with Bo and Arlene. Gibbs's tears mark the end of his depression and prove to be the catalyst for Charley's recovery. Gibbs continues living with or near the Grodens until his untimely, mysterious death in the desert. He is found on his back, arms outstretched with a sketchbook and a blue pastel crayon. Immediately following his death, his paintings become very popular on the retail market, generating a much needed revenue boost for the Grodens.

Arlene Groden

Arlene Groden is a free-spirited, compassionate, powerful woman, wife of Charley, and mother to Bo. Arlene is the strongest, most spirited character of the play. She becomes a citadel for the family, for George and for Gibbs. She is earthy, attractive and carefree. An incredible example is her naked gardening. Even when spied by a complete stranger□Gibbs□Arlene is not taken aback. She approaches the man, invites him into their home and even remains mostly unclothed until her daughter prompts her to get dressed. However, Arlene proceeds with these actions in an acceptable manner. She addresses Gibbs in a courteous, friendly manner, as if she were clothed. She is unashamed and refuses to be controlled by societal norms, hence her willing decision to live off the map.

Arlene is a dedicated mother and wife, constantly aware of her daughter's and husband's feelings. When she realizes that Charley may not pull himself out of his depression, Arlene creates a plan, sending George to the psychiatrist to get a prescription for anti-depressants. Unfortunately, the plan fails and the pills have a negative effect on Charley. Still, Arlene's dedication and constant work to help her husband is impressive. As Charley slips farther and farther into depression, leaving Arlene with more and more responsibilities, Arlene is still a focused mother and compassionate wife. Although she is stretched to nearly the end of her means, Arlene is able to give to her daughter, attend to her feelings, and help her cope with her father's illness. This is an amazing feat. Not only can Arlene help her husband with depression, she can support the entire family and tirelessly give to her daughter. It is no wonder that Gibbs falls in love with Arlene. It is trite to assume that his infatuation is centered on seeing the woman naked. Even though she has a beautiful body, it is her enigmatic, loving character that draws Gibbs into the Groden family and causes him to stay with

them until his death. It is quite clear that the family would have crumbled and fallen into an amazing despair if it were not for Arlene's impressive fortitude.

Adult Bo Groden

Adult Bo Groden narrates the play. She is a filter through which descriptions of characters flow. Adult Bo is a bank manager in Salt Lake City, Utah, and dresses the conservative part. Her language is florid. She adds descriptions of characters that are not always accurate, but they offer an opinionated view of what happened during the summer of her father's depression. Adult Bo states, "I look to that summer for answers to great mysteries. Of deep love. And loss." The Adult Bo dialogue does two things: first, it leads us into scenes, setting a mood and providing background information that adds increased depth, clarity and meaning to sequences; and second, Adult Bo's life, language and attitude that she has developed living *on the map* in society emphasizes the life the Grodens lived *off the map* outside of society. Some of Adult Bo's comments seem critical of her upbringing, but she still relies on and recollects back to her days in New Mexico when she contemplates life's mysteries. It seems as though Adult Bo is torn between her current life in society and her childhood outside of it. She waffles emotionally on the benefits and ills of both lifestyles. The theme of a lost childhood constantly repeats itself in all types of writing, whether it be plays, fiction or poetry, and Adult Bo is the manifestation of this theme.

Young Bo Groden

Young Bo is the fiery, outspoken eleven year-old daughter of Charley and Arlene. Where her adult counterpart waffles on the benefits of a lifestyle removed from society, Young Bo desires nothing more than an escape from her life *off the map*. The young girl has a vibrant imagination. In one scene, she plays with imaginary dogs. Although she does not attend a traditional school, her mother, father, George, and Gibbs all take on different roles in contributing to her education. Nonetheless, Bo's energies are intensely directed at the outside world. She writes outlandish letters to companies, claiming faults in their products with the intent of receiving free samples. Bo also has a Mexican pen pal in prison named Carlos Martinez. She is immediately drawn to Gibbs, an outsider, whom she bombards with a constant stream of questions. Bo wants to escape her life, though she is not miserable. She simply wants more and her mind is constantly searching and exploring. Her desires developed her crafty and sneaky sensibilities. Nonetheless, her frustration with her isolated lifestyle is often exposed through her actions. When Gibbs arrives, she decides to change her name to Cecilia-Rose. She claims that she does not live there and that she's simply helping out Charley and Arlene. These are all clear signs of her attempts to separate herself from her life. The apex of Bo's resolute attempts to integrate society and escape her solitary, peaceful life comes with her purchase of a boat for her father. Through crafty means, Bo applies and receives an American Express credit card. With her card she purchases a five-thousand-dollar boat to be delivered to the Grodens. Although her action is guileful, her intention is good. She planned on giving the boat to her father to help with his

depression. Oddly, the Grodens find her actions impressive and, although they do not know how they'll pay for Bo's purchase, Charley shows excitement for the first time during the summer. Young Bo's tribulation with her life helps construct a mysterious summer that, as revealed by Adult Bo, continues to affect her as she ages.

Charley Groden

Charley Groden is a Korean War veteran, husband to Arlene, and father to Bo. He has limited dialogue during the play, but he is central to the plot. The play takes place during a summer when Charley is struggling with a severe case of depression. Before his depression set in, Charley was the backbone of the family. He is strong, vibrant man who is skilled in many trades and is normally characterized by his energetic, efficient nature. He teaches his daughter important lessons, both constructive and emotive. However, during this summer, and the duration of the play, he has lost any tendency towards his manic pursuits and is wallowing in a deep depression. Throughout the play it is clear that Charley understands his own condition. He realizes that his body and mind are lifeless. He lacks any emotional feeling whatsoever and although he never sobs, his eyes frequently leak tears. The only sensation he can feel is pain and he embraces it on several occasions. For example, Charley pulls his own decaying tooth; he leaves a painful pebble in his shoe; and even tries to antagonize his large, strong friend, George, into a fistfight, relishing the pain of each moment. Everyone is affected by Charley's depression.

Bo has little understanding of why her father is suddenly so distant from her. They used to share many moments together, hiking through the woods and scavenging at the dump. George, a peaceful, quiet man, often relied heavily on Charley to maintain conversation and to be a good friend and companion. Charley's depression has left George frustrated and worried. Arlene has stepped up to the challenge and is coping with Charley's illness with dedication. She has taken on as much of Charley's responsibilities as possible, but relies heavily on Gibbs and George to help with Bo. In addition, the depression has extinguished Charley's sex drive and, although her love never wanes, Arlene struggles with the absence of physical contact. Charley is saved from his depression by a series of events. Gibbs's crying and discussion of his own personal depression, and envy of Charley's life and family, helps to pull Charley from his own despair. Plus, Bo's creative, sneaky purchase of a boat piques Charley's interest and ignites his first energetic dedication to a project in a long time. With these two catalysts, Charley begins to pull out of his deep depression, returning to his friends, his daughter and his wife.

Themes

Fortitude and Frailty

These antonyms create an important thematic struggle in *Off the Map*, most remarkably in Charley Groden. However, this theme is also applicable to the Groden family and their decision to live off the map. Charley Groden is a large, powerful man. He is able-bodied and intelligent. Charley is responsible for constructing, fixing and building up the Groden's home. Yet, during the summer of this play, Charley has become amazingly frail. His mind has been clouded with a thick, dark fog that has rendered him useless. The only remainder of his fortitude is his ability to withstand pain and, as if to remind himself of what he used to be, Charley welcomingly embraces a diseased tooth, a painful stone in his shoe, and a physical altercation with a friend. The Grodens live in a constant awareness of their balance between fortitude and frailty. Although they are courageous and have proven they have the fortitude to withstand nature, they are also much more vulnerable than if they were living in society. In a strange paradox, living outside of society makes you stronger than living within society, yet living outside of society leaves you more susceptible. The Grodens tread a fine line. They live outside of society and they live well. Their child is educated, their home is warm, they eat well and they love each other. However, as expressed through Charley's illness, the Grodens are exceptionally vulnerable to outside influence. Without steady income, regular medical or dental care, access to public schools, or a sizeable support mechanism, the Grodens could easily slip from isolated, peaceful fortitude to desperate, longing frailty. This balance helps create tension in *Off the Map* and, more importantly, it plays a key role in developing Charley and Arlene.

Depression

Both Charley Groden and William Gibbs suffer from depression. Charley is prone to long periods of inaction, difficulty thinking, and feelings of dejection. Gibbs feels similar, but with a special emphasis on hopelessness. Charley is constantly leaking tears from his eyes, while Gibbs hasn't cried in ages. However, aside from these clinical symptoms that set the mood of the play, depression also plays a thematic role. These two men and their separate struggles against a common demon create the primary plot and conflict of *Off the Map*. Charley lives off the map and struggles with depression. Gibbs lives on the map and also struggles with depression. With this, both men begin to realize that their problems are internalized. There is not something outside of either man responsible for their depression; they must look within themselves to discover what is causing their illness. When both men see their opposites in each other□Charley off the map, Gibbs on the map□but recognize that they share a common ailment, it becomes clear that they must resolve their issues by turning inward. It is as if they suddenly understand that their circumstance is not responsible for their illness. No longer does either man feel the need to search outside of himself for a cause or cure for their depression. Each individual's recognition of the other's battle with depression helps free them both from

their external constraints, allowing them both to look inward to their psychological well-being. With this, Ackermann makes a statement about depression, its effect on others, and the importance of expressing and sharing feelings.

Upsetting Harmony and Coming-of-Age

The crescendo of Bo Groden's life may very well be the summer setting of *Off the Map*. For many kids, coming-of-age is tied to upsetting some sort of harmony in the world. A youth begins to grow up through subversive, disobedient actions. More often than not a child truly comes of age by upsetting the harmony of their life as it is predetermined by their family. Of course, this is not usually a permanent or damaging action; it can be as simple as having a pen pal in prison or illegally acquiring an American Express card. Regardless of the particular action, the crux of coming-of-age through upsetting harmony rests completely on a young person turning against what is convention in order to go out on his or her own. During this summer, Bo successfully comes of age. It is no wonder that her adult self looks "to that summer for answers to great mysteries." This summer changed Bo's life. Her actions sent her on her own path, back into society, one that she followed throughout the course of her life. Looking back, the change that upsets the harmony is always somewhat in question, considering such a big decision was made at such a young age.

Style

Memory and Mood

The prevailing feeling of the play is love. Throughout the summer of Charley's depression, love keeps the family and friends bound closely together. Regardless of Charley's outbursts (fighting with George) or Bo's revolt against her mother (killing the coyote), the characters love for one another never wavers. Often, when love is the prevailing mood, its development is cheap and shabby. Ackermann conquers this with a realistic portrayal that is emphasized with Adult Bo's memory of her family and friends. Although she lends insights into characters and scenes, at the heart of Adult Bo's desire to recollect this summer is her memory of the love that held everyone together. Without the keen development of love as mood and the touching recollection of Adult Bo's memories, Ackermann's play would have felt like an incomplete melodrama. Instead, it is a remarkable portrayal of a love shared between family and friends.

Monologues

Adult Bo steps in at various times during *Off the Map* to give the audience her spin on the scene and characters. Adult Bo lives on the map in Salt Lake City, Utah and works as a banker. Her language and dress are formal. This is directly juxtaposed with Young Bo and her family living off the map in northern New Mexico. The Grodens are not uneducated or unintelligent, but they are very informal in language and dress□in Arlene's case, she dresses informally when she's actually clothed. The diametric tones are intentional. Not only do they separate Adult Bo's life from her youth, it also helps to emphasize the family's separation from society. The stark difference between Adult Bo in Utah and Young Bo in New Mexico is drastic, just as the Groden family's way of life was drastically different from the social norm.

Historical Context

Off the Map takes place in the present and, mainly, the early 1970s. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States of America was fighting the Vietnam War. In the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to take offensive action against the North Vietnamese. This launched what would prove to be a gruesome, tiresome and poorly organized war against the North Vietnamese. In the years that followed, Johnson increased the number of young Americans sent to battle in Vietnam. As the number of troops drafted increased, so did the number of protesters back in the States. "United hippies" emerged in full force. Hippies were seen as outsiders, advocating a counterculture and rejecting the mores of established society. Long hair, bright clothing, and recreational drug use are often associated with hippies. Because of their participation in anti-war activities, hippies were propelled to the forefront of the national media. Soon, people were burning draft cards, marching on Washington, and some even immolated themselves in protest. The movement against the Vietnam War was impressive. Thousands of people were arrested□even famous individuals like Muhammad Ali□for refusing to be drafted.

The Vietnam War stirred a great sense of racial and social unrest in the United States. The bulk of the troops drafted were poor or minorities, or both. Most people who legally escaped the draft were in college. This was an elite group, comprised most of wealthy Caucasians. With a large number of Caucasians escaping the draft, the military turned towards African Americans. This discrepancy fueled racial injustice, as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining power behind Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many African Americans found it difficult to go fight for a country that did not respect, honor, or dignify them. In many parts of the Southern United States, African Americans were still denied the right to vote; thus, it seemed like there was little reason to go to Vietnam to fight communism and install democracy, when it did not seem to be working at home. All of these problems led to the enormous anti-war movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

However, these movements against the government were not the only anti-social responses of this generation. In addition to the highly publicized Civil Rights Movement and the hippies of the Anti-War Movement, many people disappeared from the United States's radar screen all together. There was a massive exodus of people leaving the United States for Canada or other foreign countries. Plus, still more simply disappeared *off the map*, as in Ackermann's play.

In what can only be a testimony to understanding war, Charley□a Korean War Veteran□and his wife Arlene started their family in a shack in the outer edges of uninhabited northern New Mexico. With an amazing capacity for empathy, they felt so moved by the times that they desired to escape what was becoming an unpalatable, violent society. In an attempt to save themselves and their daughter from the hate, unrest and prejudice of the world, the Grodens simply uprooted themselves and disappeared. Although they were eventually discovered by Gibbs, the family was still significantly off the map and, thus, they lived a hard, but more peaceful life outside of the luxury, decadence and instability of the social norm.

Critical Overview

Ackermann's play *Off the Map* was originally published in 1994 when it was selected as one of seven plays included in the collection *Women Playwrights: The Best Plays of 1994*. This collection's playwrights were not as ethnically diverse as other anthologies and no criteria was given for the selection or inclusion of these works. Nonetheless, Ackermann's inclusion is noteworthy. Other fresh voices of the collection include Lynne Alvarez, Marlane Meyer, Theresa Rebeck, Jacquelyn Reingold, Paula Vogel, and Allison Eve Zell.

Dramatic criticism and reviews for *Off the Map* are elusive at best. Very little has been written or is easily unearthed about the play. However, there are a handful of short, critical reviews circulating throughout the Internet. In general, this criticism praises *Off the Map* and the play is frequently described as accessible, but poetic. Most frequently, critics write about the mood of the play, the expression of the family's love, about struggle and survival. Although critics generally touch on the emotional side of Ackermann's play, there is little written about the deeper message behind the family's survival, one that challenges contemporary views of society, personal freedom, and individuality.

Off the Map continues to be produced throughout the United States at both the collegiate and professional level. The play is considered accessible and underwent a rebirth when the independent film director Campbell Scott turned Ackermann's play into a movie. The movie premiered at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, to excellent reviews. Although the movie did not win any awards, it received a remarkable response behind the support of a well-known director, Scott, and well-known film stars Sam Elliott and Joan Allen.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Martinelli examines how the characters in Off the Map *struggle with depression and desires in pursuit of self-reliance.*

In *Off the Map*, Joan Ackermann paints a picture of the Groden family living outside of society in northern New Mexico. With limited contact from friends and no contact with the outside world, except for sparse mail delivery, the Grodens have created a life that is sheltered, productive and amicable. Yet, during the summer of the play, Charley Groden, the father to Bo Groden and husband to Arlene Groden, slips into a deep depression. He is distant and full of sadness. Soon thereafter, an IRS agent, William Gibbs, arrives to collect back taxes. Gibbs also suffers from terrible depression. Both men struggle with a common ailment, only in very different ways. The last character involved in a focused struggle is Bo Groden. The eleven-year-old girl is determined to escape her parents' lifestyle for a life in society. All three characters successfully change their lives, pulling themselves from depression or changing their position in society, resulting in what Ralph Waldo Emerson would call self-reliance.

Before Emerson's values can be applied to the success of each individual, their unique struggle must be examined. To begin with, Charley is typically a strong, powerful man with great abilities and outstanding composure. Although his wife is an amazing, steadfast individual, she benefits greatly from his talents and love. During the summer of the play, however, Charley has fallen dreadfully ill with depression. He has no passion for his wife, nor life, nor interest in their daughter. He cannot complete simple tasks and lives a life heavy with dejection, with tears constantly leaking from his eyes. Charley is most devastated by his inability to pinpoint a reason for his depression, stating, "I don't even remember how I got here." His new friend, Gibbs, originally claims that his own depression was from a moment when he "came home from school and [his] mother had hung herself." This is what Charley is searching for, something outside of himself that can be a catalyst for his depression. With jealous Charley replies, "You put me to shame . . . a good reason like that." For Charley, his depression should be something he can fix, like an old car. There should be a concrete problem that needs to be corrected or, at least, an event that can be pointed to as a cause for the damage. Unfortunately, depression is rarely an easy, quick fix.

Secondly, Gibbs steps into the Grodens' life as a stranger delivering bad news. He arrives on foot at the Grodens' property to collect back taxes. Living *off the map*, the Grodens had not filed tax forms in five years and, although they live poor and outside of society, the IRS does not see them as being exempt from filing tax forms. When Gibbs arrives, he has been stung by bees, and he falls ill with a terrible allergic reaction. Gibbs is forced to spend three days sweating with fever on the Grodens' couch. During this time, Charley interrupts Gibbs late in the evenings to bring him water, but, more importantly, to question him about depression. The two men discover that they both suffer from a common ailment and neither man can identify a potential cure. To Charley's dismay, Gibbs has been suffering from depression his whole life. Gibbs

states, "I've never not been depressed." Gibbs is extremely isolated by his depression. Although he lives within society, he moves frequently and is rarely pleased. He has nothing of value or love in his life and, thus, is devoid of nearly any emotion. Unlike Charley, Gibbs never cries. In a strange way, Gibbs living in society restricts him, making him less free to express emotion than Charley, who is living outside of society. One man is a spigot of tears, while the other is bone dry.

With Gibbs and Charley, Ackerman makes an interesting statement about depression, society, and self-reliance. Both men suffer from a common affliction, both men share different symptoms, and neither Gibbs nor Charley seem to make any progress against their disease on their own. Although Gibbs and Charley must overcome their depressions on their own, each man achieves their mental health through observing the other. In what is easily defined as the turning point in both men's struggle against depression, Adult Bo recounts a conversation between Gibbs and Charley. Gibbs tries to express his admiration and envy of Charley and his family. He expresses his gratitude for being allowed to stay with the Grodens and, for the first time in his life, enjoy living and exploring art. Sharing his feelings with Charley brings Gibbs to tears for the first time in twenty years. Adult Bo recollects,

as the valve opened in William Gibbs . . . releasing a torrent of tears, it seems the same valve continued turning in my father all the way to the off position, shutting off that steady leak that had streaked his face and our lives for more than half a year.

In this instant, Ackermann has linked Gibbs and Charley's different, independent battles with depression. Gibbs, through Charley and his family, becomes aware of how he used to live his life on the map; he realizes that his new life *off the map* has enabled him, for the first time, to be true to himself and to express his feelings. Charley, through Gibbs's words of admiration and understanding, is reintroduced to the spectacular life he lives with his family *off the map*. Adult Bo finishes with wise words stating, "In comforting others do we comfort ourselves."

Adult Bo's final statement is a perfect segue into Ralph Waldo Emerson and a better understanding of self-reliance. It would seem as though Gibbs and Charley relied on each other to defeat their depression. However, a sharper analysis reveals that Gibbs and Charley were incapable of helping themselves until they could help each other, something that is quite impossible within society. As Emerson states in his essay, "Self-Reliance,"

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. . . . The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

With Emerson's words in mind, Ackermann's play takes on entirely new meaning. Quietly, Ackermann comments on society and the "conspiracy against manhood" with Adult Bo's remarks that the two men helped cure themselves by comforting each other. Outside of society, Gibbs and Charley are free to help one another, to comfort and console each other in what can only be described as a mutual self-reliance. In yet

another twist, it would appear that Ackermann is making her opinion known about pharmaceutical drugs and the cure for depression. At one point, Charley takes an anti-depressant to help with his condition. The drug does nothing positive. In fact, it incites Charley to attack his friend, George. These drugs are a chemical demand for Charley's conformity. Without their position outside of society, Ackermann would claim, neither man would have successfully overcome their depression.

However, as the play draws to an end, Adult Bo's recollection of Gibbs's painting of an ocean's horizon alludes to something positive within society; a glimmer of hope. Emerson writes, "We first share the life by which things exist and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we have shared their cause." It is fair to state that nature, for Emerson, is all things outside of the individual. His statement, in its dedication, asks that humankind not forget our role in society and its impact on nature. It is the forgetting that causes the damage. Adult Bo, living on the map in society, may be Ackermann's glimmer of hope because she does look back on her life outside of society, questioning her differing lives. If Adult Bo remembers and dissects her different lives, then there is hope for humankind. In the closing moments of the play, Adult Bo describes Gibbs's painting, stating that she views "the ocean as the past, the sky as the future, and the present as that thin precarious line where both meet, precarious because as we stand there it curves under foot. Ever changing." This is how Adult Bo feels about her past and her shared cause, living both *off the map* and *on the map*. Adult Bo has not forgotten her past and she understands that each moment in the present means that life is ever changing and, thus, so is her impact on the world.

Although Ackermann is quietly critical of society, she does leave us with hope. The Grodens are a strong, functional family, even through Charley's depression. They are accepting, reasonable people, opening their arms to friends and strangers. And although Ackermann may not say much about the positive aspects of society, her creation of Adult Bo leaves a great deal of hope. If society was made up of nothing but the likes of Adult Bo, then there is a good chance that Emerson would be happy to live in such a place. As Emerson writes, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself." Oddly, living within a society where such mass self-reliance was endorsed would mean that everywhere would have to be *off the map*, raising the question of whether such a society could ever exist. Hence, as Emerson and Ackermann would concur, life must be a struggle for self-reliance; where it can truly be achieved is yet another question.

Source: Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on *Off the Map*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Off the Map was adapted as a film by Campbell Scott, starring Sam Elliott and Joan Allen. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2003 and experienced a short run in theaters. It was re-released in U.S. theaters in March 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Off the Map is focused on Adult Bo's recollection back to a pivotal summer in her life. Think back to an event in your childhood that you believe still affects your life and write a short one-act play about how the event has shaped your life today.

Depression has a large impact on the plot and the characters in *Off the Map*. Think of three plays, or works of fiction, where an illness has been at the forefront of the story and compare them to *Off the Map*. Are the illnesses in the works you selected mental or physical? How are the illnesses different from, or similar to, depression as seen in *Off the Map*?

Off the Map has been produced as a motion picture. Pick one other play that you know has also been turned into a motion picture, then read the play, watch the film and compare the movie to the play. How do they differ? How are they similar? Does the movie follow the script of the play or even the plot?

The Grodens live off the map, removed from society. In addition to drawing a comparison with Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Grodens may have similarities to Henry David Thoreau. Drawing from Thoreau's book, *Walden*, what connections can be made between Thoreau and the Grodens? Between Thoreau and Gibbs? If there is no correlation, explain the differences.

What Do I Read Next?

The Batting Cage (1999), a play by Joan Ackermann, tells the story of two estranged sisters who make unlikely journeys as the try to regain their control of their lives after the death of their dearly loved third sister.

Marcus is Walking (1999), a play by Joan Ackermann, examines, in eleven short, offbeat vignettes, the emotional landscape people navigate while they travel in their cars.

How I Learned to Drive (1997), a play by Paula Vogel, examines the destructive and incestuous relationship between Li'l Bit and her uncle. It is written with frank language and straightforward honesty that creates a remarkably candid view of a dysfunctional family.

The Waverly Gallery (2000), a play by Kenneth Lonergan, is a potently impressive and frequently hilarious story about the last years of a fiery, talkative grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's disease.

Further Study

Earley, Michael, and Philippa Keil, eds., *The Modern Monologue: Women*, Routledge, 1993.

This book is an exciting selection of speeches drawn from important plays of the twentieth century. The monologues in this book are all written for women characters and they provide an excellent sampling of a wide array of styles.

Ensler, Eve, *The Vagina Monologues: The V-Day Edition*, Villard, 2000.

This play is a direct, hilarious celebration of female sexuality. However, it delivers a powerful message. This edition celebrates the grassroots movement, inspired by this play, to stop violence against women.

Falk, John, *Hello to All That: A Memoir of War, Zoloft, and Peace*, Henry Holt, 2005.

This book is a bizarre, heartbreaking, and sometimes hilarious memoir of a war correspondent and his continuous struggle against chronic depression.

Storr, Anthony, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, Ballantine Books, 1989.

Storr uses history's greatest artists and minds□Goya, Kafka, Trollope, Kant and others□linking the capacity to be alone with self-discovery and becoming aware of one's deepest feelings.

Bibliography

Ackermann, Joan, *Off the Map*, Dramatists Play Service, 1999.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, Bantam Books, 1990, pp. 151, 158, 171.