Only Children Short Guide

Only Children by Alison Lurie

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Contents

Characters

The central and generally most popular character in Only Children is the wise individualist, teacher, and hostess, Anna. She brings a feminist twist to Thoreau's ideal—out of place with the social world of her time, she has severed all connections with the city but for work: educating future generations. Anna sets an example to the girls of how to be independent, self-reliant, and creative in a patriarchy that supports total dependence and conformity in women. Lurie develops Anna in contrast to Celia and Honey, who in their own marriages seem content to be isolated in the private sphere, ac tively discouraged by their husbands from working. Anna, on the other hand, chose her career over a relationship with Dan, who could not understand her desire to work away from home during the week, let alone wait for her.

Anna distrusts traditional romance and love. In discussing a past suitor (most likely Dan) with Celia, Anna describes a traditional courtship involving poetry about "the merging of souls." Whereas Celia finds this romantic, Anna is disgusted: "I can't imagine anything more terrible than being completely owned by some other person. Or owning them.

That's what the Civil War was all about."

Her complete self-possession gains her the respect of the others, so that, in a sense, she becomes a teacher to the parents as well as their children.

Anna is the only one of Lurie's characters to be based on her own acquaintance—her favorite headmistress as a child. Lurie told an interviewer that "In those days professional women were thought to be spinsterish and oppressive . . . She was very much in charge of her own life, yet always warm and kind. She was very good to me and encouraged me to write and draw, and impressed upon my parents the importance of taking me seriously" (Key West Review, Spring 1988).

Like her real-life ancestor, Anna's most important role, to Lurie, is that of an advocate for children.

Also infrequent in Lurie's characterization is the use of recurring characters.

Although her themes and settings are often linked, only one of her characters, Lennie Zimmern, shows up often, usually as a minor character. Seen in Only Children as a pubescent trouble-maker and outsider, Lennie also menacingly appears at different stages of his life as "Leonard" and "L. D." Zimmern in Real People (1969), The War between the Tates (1974), Foreign Affairs (1984), and The Truth about Lorin Jones (1988; see separate entry). In a 1992 interview with Richard Hauer Costa, Lurie stated that the recurring character is "a private joke . . . Zimmern is the protagonist of the first novel I ever wrote— one of two I couldn't get published. Now I keep bringing him in as a sort of reminder that he was vital to my first efforts at fiction". This recurrence, although a joke, has the effect of linking the above titles historically within Lurie's fictional reality, providing, for Lurie fans, an air of conspiracy and greater verisimilitude.

Social Concerns

As the story evolves, the reader learns that the tide, Only Children, has multiple implications: first that the narrative will only be from the viewpoint of the children, Mary Ann Hubbard and Lolly Zimmern; second, that they, like many of the adults present, are only-children; third, that at some point even the adults behave as if they were "only children;" fourth, and most importantly, that the dismissal of children's questioning with the common rationalization, "they're only children," is insulting and dishonest. Lurie's most important social issue is adults' common underestimation of what children see and struggle to understand, and to the radical potential and vulnerability of a child's mind. Following the experiences of the two eight-year-olds through a Fourth-of-July weekend vacation to the Catskill Mountains in 1935, we witness their parents' behavior from a new perspective—that of a surprisingly opened, sensitive, and critical child-eye.

The Hubbards and Zimmerns spend this weekend at the rustic farm of Anna King, the girls' "magical" and liberalminded teacher. Here Lurie uses the pastoral setting to release the adults from their urbane lifestyles and responsibilities, some regressing to childish antics, others demonstrating adult corruptness. Lolly's father, Dan Zimmern, who has a secret romantic past with Anna, openly flirts with Honey (Honoria) Hubbard, causing his wife, Celia, much grief. Later he will secretly attempt to rekindle his sexual relationship with Anna, who hesitantly refuses the offer. His troubled teen-aged son, Lennie, stages dramatic revolts and receives the desired attention of his father only in the form of harsh rebukes. At the Fourth-of-July party that caps off the weekend, Honey cuts off Dan's mustache in front of everyone, in a sense castrating him for the disrespect he has shown her.

Dan and Bill finally come to blows over Honey's affections and their politics. All of these gritty indiscretions are witnessed or overheard by Mary Ann and Lolly, whose reactions form the evidence of Lurie's concern with the treatment of children.

The parents in Only Children are flawed in the most believable and everyday ways: Bill is a workaholic who has, according to Honey, "forgotten how to play." Honey is vain and spoiled, and she frequently ignores her daughter. Dan is a selfish womanizer, and Celia is excessively dependent and insecure (not entirely without reason). Throughout the sequence of events that forms the plot of Only Children, we see these parents' problems affecting their children and the parents constantly underestimating the extent to which their children understand and are affected by the environment which surrounds them.

The only admirable adult character in Only Children is not a parent, but the girls' teacher and hostess for the weekend.

Unlike the Hubbards and Zimmerns, Anna King treats children with great respect, as Mary Ann observes, "When you talk to Anna she looks at you instead of at things behind you like most grownups." Too often, the child's voice is muted in family dialogue. Anna represents Lurie's ideal solution to this problem—she, as if magically, not only relates

well with children, but can bring their parents to understanding them by appealing to their own childishness. Mary Ann supposes "there was a sort of magic spell on Anna's house that made everybody who visited her slowly turn into children, if they weren't already." Like Mary Poppins, she is the equalizing arbiter who can teach both children and parents to communicate better through diplomacy and by setting an example. In the meantime, she teaches the reader how not to misjudge or overlook the cognition of children.

The regression Mary Ann predicts indeed takes place. By the time of the big party, the adults have begun squabbling and fighting. Mary Ann notes that the decorations set the stage for a children's party: "They didn't act like it was going to be a grown-up party, but one for kids, with balloons and party favors Anna found in the cupboard . . ." Lurie brilliantly satirizes adult behavior to illuminate that it is not so far from children's as we like to think. Dan has dunked Honey in the lake, so she convinces him to let her cut his hair, only to humiliate him with the surprise pruning of his mustache. Lurie emphasizes the similarity between adult and child behavior further with Bill's and Dan's political bickering: it is nothing more than a contest to decide who can be the better liberal. Ironically, Bill's argument that the advertising industry is "Treating the American people like children" belies his understanding that such condescension is oppressive, yet his obsession with "acting one's age" causes him to overlook the creative potential of play, and Mary Ann's insight. Dan also adheres to this ageist double standard, arguing that New Dealism treats "people like kids," while he is doing the same to his teen-aged son and wife. The party breaks up in the climax of the novel: Bill attacks Dan, Dan fights back more fiercely, Honey jumps to defend Bill, and Celia intercepts and joins the fray only to discover Lolly and Mary Ann witnessing the whole fiasco. At once the parents are aware of their folly and concerned with the image it presents to the girls.

The next morning the cover-up begins.

The assumption that children's innocent minds must be protected drives Honey, concerned about how the night before affected Mary Ann, to ask Anna's opinion about how to cope with the fiasco.

She repeats what she'd told her daughter: "Ah said Dan and Bill couldn't agree on what records to play on the Victrola, and so they started fighting. Well, it's the truth in a way . . . And it's the kind of thing kids fight about, so Ah figured they'd understand." The children do understand, ironically, not so much because of Honey's explanation, but because their parents were acting like children. More importantly, Lurie makes it clear that Honey's explanation to Mary Ann is a lie. Bill and Dan only fought over the Victrola because of the tensions and suspicions surrounding Honey's and Dan's flirtations. For Lurie, glossing over the embarrassing reality of adult folly is a sin of omission—a sin that disregards the child's right to know the truth and her ability to process that knowledge. For example, Honey would probably be surprised to find that Mary Ann has already made sense of such alcoholic mishaps long before the party: "Grown-ups got really dumb sometimes, especially at parties." Unaware that Mary Ann has her own valid opinions, she is disturbed that her daughter asks many questions about the previous night. Anna suggests that she should be more concerned about Lolly, who

does not ask any. She believes that the child who asks questions and gets straightforward answers will be healthier emotionally.

Anna could be said to embody Freud's views on parental honesty with children.

In his famous case study, "An Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy," Freud studied the progressive withdrawal and increasing fears of a boy who had presumably witnessed his parents' copulation, and even more traumatically, according to Freud, had been lied to when he questioned them about it. Freud blamed the boy's parents for what he considered unnecessary and damaging mystification: "It is undoubtedly nothing else but the customary prudishness and their own bad conscience over sex that causes adults to adopt this attitude of 'mystery-making' in front of children."

Lurie takes up this age-old controversial subject of sexual knowledge in her depiction of Lolly Zimmern. Lolly has seen too much and been told too little, to the point that she is traumatized into silence.

Whenever she remembers taboo things she has seen or heard, Lolly struggles to shut them out: "No words are safe.

Nothing is safe and nobody. Everyone everywhere is vulgar and horrible disgusting."

Mary Ann, the heroine, forms an immediate contrast to Lolly. Whereas Lolly has been traumatized by the secret lives of her parents, her inability to understand them, and her fear of the unknown, Mary Ann works like a child-detective, constantly seeking out the truth and itching to know and understand the world beyond protected childhood. Mary Ann is the model revolutionary—she despises the "sweet" image of children and sets out to be the opposite of Lolly, who is extremely obedient and silent, because she knows what the adults don't, that Lolly is a "good child" to her own detriment: "[Mary Ann] has heard before about Lolly's ladylike ways. That just means that she always said Please and Thank you and never contradicted anybody, because either she wasn't listening anyhow or she was scared to." Mary Ann, on the other hand, knows that at times a child must contradict parents because they are not always right. Her insights about adult behavior are sobering. She recognizes that every denial is in some sense an affirmation and vice-versa: "Whenever her mother says 'honestly' it means she is lying." She understands the complex dishonesty of manners, as is revealed when she thinks of her parents and religion: "they are agnostics, which means they think God probably doesn't exist but they are too polite to say so to people who believe he does." She wants to always tell the truth herself, and at times that means being contradictory. For example, when she hits Bobby McCarty, who has broken her toy, Honey forces her to say that she is sorry: "'You want me to tell a lie,' she screamed." She hates to apologize, not out of pride, but honesty. If not, she is at least trying to argue her way out with logic. Either way, Lurie depicts the child as capable of rational, ethical thought. She is combating the Western stereotype that youth and inexperience equals unreason and ignorant dependence.

Techniques

Critically speaking, the most unique quality of Only Children is Lurie's narrative technique. Surprisingly few writers for adults adopt a child's point of view. Such perspective is especially challenging because although we were all once children, we can only remember select thoughts we had as children, not how we thought. How can the adult really know how the child knows? Lurie's interest in this issue, and especially with finding an answer that favors the child's intellectual aptitude and dignity, certainly adds to the complexity of her technique: She must convincingly adopt a child's perspective and make us respect it, while remaining aware of the fact that it cannot honestly be represented by an adult. To deal with these contradictory demands, she layers many perspectives—Mary Ann's, occasionally Lolly's, and an impersonal dramatic point of view, especially as concerns the actions and dialogue of the parents. This allows us to see what is going on at the farm but not to penetrate the minds of the adults.

We see them more from a distance, relying only on dialogue and subtext for clues.

We are, however, privy to the children's thoughts. This allies us more closely with them from the start. Lurie tries to follow a child's thought patterns at their own pace, thus devoting pages to Mary Ann's personification of the family car, Lolly lying in bed afraid and bored at night, both girls playing elaborate fantasy games and listening through cracks to the parents' activities from which they've been excluded. Lurie creates a sense of authentic wonder and clarity, even genius, from the point of view of the child mind.

Demonstrating what developmental psychologist Jean Piaget called the animism of child thought, Lurie reminds us of the free imagination all children have, unhindered by abstraction. Mary Ann has compassion for her father's Franklin, defending it against Honey's tag, "this damn old jalopy." In her thoughts the reader can detect a certain logic and concreteness lost to most adults: The Franklin is named after Benjamin Franklin who was a great revolutionary patriot and inventor with his picture on the Saturday Evening Post every week, fat and gray with little square glasses. He was very good at saving money and discovered electricity with a kite and a key and wrote an almanac full of dull wise sayings.

Now he is their car and he doesn't mind that. He likes driving around the country and seeing what's become of it since he died and how much electricity there is everywhere.

When you are lying down in his fat gray back-seat lap you can hear his engine saying the same dull things he said in history. —A penny saved is a penny earned, he says, over and over again.

Child psychologists recognize animism [attributing life, even sentience, to objects] as a typical thought process in children. But Lurie goes beyond a clinical explication, illustrating the child's eager simplicity in her very language. Lurie overuses conjunctions

and compound sentences as Mary Ann's thoughts are rushed together brilliantly and clearly without the more complex and tedious qualifications and subordinations characteristic of adult speech. Lurie's style enables us to glance into the thoughts of children with less imposition, and to see adult behavior more clearly in contrast.

Themes

One of the most notable and continuous themes in Only Children is that of the pastoral escape. The Hubbards and Zimmerns are escaping to the country for a weekend, and the setting plays an important part in their magical regression. Anna King's farm is not simply rural, it is intentionally rustic. She is a lady Thoreau, or as Bill describes her, a "pioneer." She embodies the American ideal of self-reliance—growing her own food, cutting her own wood, and choosing solitude over dependence. Her ties to the natural world are vital, in Mary Ann's mind, even magical. Anna nurtures the green life around her, and is loved in return: "Virginia [creeper] loving Anna's house, surrounding it holding it hugging it safe forever.

Green-veined soft hands, hundreds of them ... Love. Because everything growing here loves Anna." One might be reminded, while reading Only Children, of novels like Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden (1911), or Philippa Pearce's Tom's Midnight Garden (1958), for its part in their tradition of using gardens to reflect childhood freedom and protection from the hazards of adult life. However, Lurie's pastoral setting is not simply an innocent Eden—Lolly and Mary Ann see and hear too much to remain ignorant of the reality that surrounds them.

Key Questions

Much of the conversation between adults in Only Children revolves around love and romance. Each character has a different ideal of romance and its role in his/her life. For example, to Celia love causes pain, but romance justifies it. To Anna romantic love is an opiate that masks pain and numbs one's compassion for humankind at large. Celia serves as a foil to Anna's more noble view—trapped unhappily in marriage and antiquated notions of romance, she lacks Anna's strength and freedom. Yet Anna is alone.

This does not go unnoticed by Mary Ann, who, by the final chapter, seems to be embarking on the middle road, viewing love as a necessary disease. This final chapter raises provocative topics for discussion.

1. What has Mary Ann learned about love? How has it changed her?

2. Do the parents and children depart feeling closer to Anna? Are their marriages rejuvenated? Consider the role of the pastoral setting in any changes you see in the final chapter. Was Mary Ann right about its magical powers?

3. Is Anna, as Mary Ann has suspected, simply teaching them all something new about love and family? How is Anna like or unlike other nanny figures who are saviors to children, such as Mary Poppins, Golly in Harriet the Spy, or Maria in The Sound of Music.

4. Consider Lurie's title focus: children.

How much of what Lolly and Mary Ann see on their vacation do they understand?

In what ways do their parents underestimate them because they are "only children?"

5. What is unique in Lurie's delineation of child characters? How do Mary Ann and Lolly differ from, say, famous child characters like Heidi and Pollyanna?

6. As Lurie blends psychological realism with her satire, a fruitful comparison might also be made with the children of more realistic works, such as Pearl in The Scarlet Letter (1850; see separate entry).

Do you agree with Lurie's views on children and sexual knowledge?

7. For a contemporary comparison, and one that brings in the element of race as a social factor affecting (female) children, consider similarities between Lurie's narrative technique and that of Toni Morrison's in The Bluest Eye (1970; see separate entry). Do the political aims of these two novels differ?

8. Honey, one of the adults, is an onlychild, as are Mary Ann and Lolly. Is Lurie commenting on the dynamics of singlechild families? In what other senses are the adult characters "only children"?

Consider their own forms of play, fantasy, and aggression.

Literary Precedents

For her satire and close attention to matters of marriage and manners, Lurie has often been compared to Jane Austen.

But as far as Only Children is concerned, the most remarkable literary precedent would be. Henry James, especially his What Maisie Knew (1897), which shares similar subject matter and technique.

Maisie is a girl whose parents divorce and fight over her, less for love than for image. The novel is narrated from her eyes, although not in her voice, as James explains in his preface, "I should have to stretch the matter to what my wondering witness [Maisie] materially and inevitably saw, a great deal of which quantity she either wouldn't understand or would quite misunderstand." As his tide suggests, James is interested in what children know, yet he recognized the difficulty of truthfully representing the child's thoughts, so he had to find a way to concretely narrate the events of his plot without imposing interpretations or explaining away Maisie's misunderstandings.

His solution set an example for Lurie's narrative technique: What Maisie Knew is written completely in dramatic, or objective, point of view, thus enabling insight into the character's thoughts only through dialogue. Lurie used this technique to depict her adult characters, only slipping into a limited omniscient point of view with the children.

James also respectfully hints at the unrecognized brilliance of children: "Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary." This, too, fascinates Lurie, though she sees subversive power in the muted position. Whereas James might simply observe a quizzed look on Maisie's face, or create humor out of her misunderstanding the adult goings on around her, Lurie makes a point of admiring the child's "misunderstandings"—her satire always targets the adults, not the children. For example, a common misunderstanding Lurie attributes to children (as do psychologists and educators) is hyperliteralism. Mary Ann's father tells her that after the Depression his "office might get smaller" (he is a welfare agent). Clearly unfamiliar with the phrase and its figurative meaning, Mary Ann's logic works through it a bit too literally at first: "How could it get smaller?

Mary Ann asked, imagining all the office rooms shrinking to the size of playhouse rooms . . . What could really happen would be that fewer people would work for Mary Ann's father and his office would need fewer rooms. Especially if the Republicans won the next election . . .

They are mean and selfish and let farmers burn wheat and pour milk off trains into the mud to keep the price of bread and milk high when babies are hungry." Again you can see the condensation of ideas, but in this example you can also see how Lurie delicately shifts back and forth from the voice of Mary Ann to an adult narrator who

simply helps to express her thoughts when her vocabulary fails. Regardless, Lurie's interest here is with what Mary Ann understands, which is a surprisingly great deal.

Related Titles

Lennie appears in other Lurie novels, yet he remains a minor character. The most important link Only Children has with other Lurie works is her developing interest in children and children's literature. Lurie has been teaching at Cornell University for the past twenty-eight years, and just as she has been able to incorporate her interest in children (Only Children) and children's literature (Foreign Affairs, 1984) into her novels, she has also taught children's literature and produced a critical reading of her favorite children's books, Don't Tell the Grown Ups (1990). In it she argues that the most enduring children's books last, not because of conscientious parents who purchase only the most informative, or didactic, literature for their children, but because of the subversive spirit in them that appeals not only to children but ex-children. It is this subversive spirit, like Mary Ann's, and Anna's before her, that she seeks to recognize and preserve in all of us.

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