

Pages from a Cold Island Short Guide

Pages from a Cold Island by Frederick Exley

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Contents

Pages from a Cold Island Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

Exley's protagonist in *Pages from a Cold Island* is, once again, the fictional/factual Fred Exley. And, as before, he peoples his narrative with a cast of characters — the famous, the infamous, the eccentric, and the downright ordinary. Jonathan Yardley says: "Readers who aren't interested in the workings of [Exley's] mind probably won't be interested in his books . . . but what strikes me as singularly impressive is that he makes the reader interested. The true subject of *Pages from a Cold Island* is not Edmund Wilson or Gloria Steinem or Norman Mailer, but Frederick Exley, and he makes Exley matter."

Exley's interactions with friends from a favorite watering hole on Singer Island and with acquaintances at the Iowa Writers Workshop frame three pivotal dialogues in this novel. These surreal dialogues occur between the narrator and Gloria Steinem, and between the narrator and Edmund Wilson's former servant and Wilson's daughter. Richard Brickner explains: "Both Wilson and Steinem . . . are involved in the very viability of *Pages from a Cold Island*. When Wilson dies, Exley happens to be reading *Memoirs of Hecate County* to decide if he should teach at Iowa — the Iowa job undertaken because he has been unable to finish writing his own book. And Exley believes Steinem will somehow show him the way out of the unrelieved desolation that has characterized his abandoned first draft".

Social Concerns

Exley bemoans the lack of coherence, purpose, commitment — in short meaning — in his own life and in the lives of others who share his postmodern plight. Of this novel, Jack Kroll says: "Exley evokes the world as a pop shambles, a mad morass of media monsters with no moral center. His symbol for this is the death of Edmund Wilson in 1972, which sends him off on a year of spasmodic encounters and confrontations . . . He interviews Gloria Steinem, trying unsuccessfully to divine how she had "come out of the putrid years so splendidly." Jonathan Yardly adds: "the subject of *Pages from a Cold Island* is the 'literary life,' as exemplified by Wilson, occasionally practiced by Exley himself, and as mocked by the literary personalities (Mailer, Steinem) of media fame." *Pages from a Cold Island* venerates Wilson, and, for Exley, his death is emblematic. Coupled with the turn toward societal preference for broadcast over print media, Wilson's death may underscore a "concern" Exley intimates throughout: that the place of literature in our lives (to offer guidance, moral precepts) is being or has been usurped by less thoughtful forms of expression — most notably, the television.



Techniques

Christopher Lehman-Haupt suggests that Exley's prose reaches readers by way of the Aristotelian act of katharsis.

He says: "Exley's character and experience are familiar enough to identify with (and therefore to fear) and at the same mad and extreme and bizarre enough to separate him from us (and therefore to pity). One gets involved without getting hurt."

Many reviewers have praised Exley's "fierce honesty," even within an admittedly fictionalized historical record.

Jack Kroll adds: "Exley knows that truth is in good part a function of the imagination. What counts, and where difficulty lies, is with the psychic, the emotional, the spiritual truth." In *Pages from a Cold Island*, Exley's "itemized account of his sad frolics in Florida, upstate New York and Iowa City," the author presents himself not as a hero or anti-hero, but as what Camus called the "special case." "His is a case beyond solution, a case so bravely hopeless that you must find him charming.

Be presents himself as a parody of negative capability — unable or unwilling to do a thing about himself, he is deep in misadventures, misadventures". Despite the feckless disposition of this "special case," Exley's writing evinces beautiful structure, hypnotic cadence, and a philologist's love of language.

Themes

"The death of literature" makes for a less overt theme than did that of A Fan's Notes, the "death of the American Dream." Moreover, Exley's tone in this "memoir" is less shrill and angry than before, more simpering, stuttering, almost resigned. With the eloquent markings of an elegy, the author of *Pages from a Cold Island* laments the loss of what he holds most dear: the (perceived) ability of literature to move the masses and, specifically, the literature — e.g., *Memoirs of Hecate County* — of place and time. Kroll says: "Exley's mind — full of jabber about Walter Cronkite, Barbara Walters, the Kennedys, Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe — is the mind of that stupefied cyborg who is our fellow citizen and the man in the mirror. By evoking himself as the raunchy, twitchy, paranoid lumpen-creature that he perhaps is, he evokes a lumpen-humanity toward which perhaps we are all drifting".

Key Questions

To the extent that this novel extends and expands upon ideas introduced in Exley's previous work, it will be especially helpful to have read both *A Fan's Notes and Pages From a Cold Island* prior to undertaking discussion of either.

And, if any reader has at any time fancied himself or herself a writer, he or she may enjoy exploring his or her personal experience with "the writing life" relative to Exley's expression of same in this novel. Exley's authorial elf-reflexivity will provide plenty of grist for conversation concerning what it is to write and to be a writer.

1. To what does Exley attribute his difficulty "concluding" *Pages from a Cold Island*? Does this instance of "writer's block" represent any larger malaise?
2. Describe the ways in which Edmund Wilson, Gloria Steinem, and Norman Mailer serve as foils for the protagonist of this narrative.
3. Where can you find evidence in the text to suggest Exley believes the "death" of literature is imminent? With what will it be replaced, according to the author?
4. Discuss the significance of the title *Pages from a Cold Island*. What does Exley say the "cold," especially, signifies?
5. Do you agree with the equation of Exley, the character, with Camus' "special case?" What specifically, renders this central character neither hero nor antihero?
6. At several points in this novel, Exley extols the virtues of both youth and age. Where does this occur? What does he see about each as redemptive?

Why is middle-age the "least desirable"?

Literary Precedents

Much has been made of Exley's debt as a writer, to his "lost generation" predecessors — Fitzgerald, Hemingway — who wrote of Americans disenchanted in an earlier era. Still, Exley remains most fully inscribed in Postmodernism. To wit: One theme of *Pages from a Cold Island* is "its author's failure to bring the book to a successful completion. Echoing the postmodern impulse to self-referentiality, *Pages from a Cold Island* frequently discusses the author's problems in rescuing the 480page manuscript from the trunk of his car, where it has been for three years".

As in *A Fan's Notes* (1968), Exley uses an historical figure against whom to contrast his own lack of success; this time, the American writer Edmund Wilson.

Related Titles

Spanning a publication period of twenty years, *Pages from a Cold Island* succeeds *A Pan's Notes* and precedes *Last Notes from Home* (1988) in Frederick Exley's trilogy of "fictional memoirs." Taken together and via flashback, these novels chronicle all but the earliest years of Exley's evolution, his life of the body and of the mind.



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