

# **The Patience of A Saint Short Guide**

## **The Patience of A Saint by Andrew Greeley**

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Patience of A Saint Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>

# Characters

Red Kane is the protagonist of *The Patience of a Saint*, and the other characters serve the function of illuminating the story of his midlife resurrection and his second chance at both life and love.

The character who best serves this purpose is Red's wife, Eileen. Greeley has frequently been criticized for his depiction of female characters. Reviewers often see them as unbelievable, idealized stereotypes of perfection.

Initially, Eileen Ryan Kane appears to fit this category. Although she is middle-aged, she is still beautiful, trim, and sexually appealing to both her husband and other men. She is a well-educated professional, capable of flawlessly running a household as well as managing a demanding career. Taken on a literal level, Eileen strains credibility. On the metaphoric level, however, Eileen (whose name means "light") is a metaphor for the love of God. Greeley has written that lovers should treat each other like shy children — slowly advancing toward each other and only gradually revealing to each other the fullness of their beings.

In this respect, maintains Greeley, the relationship between lovers is like the relationship between God and the human beings He has created. The more slow the revelation of God, the more passionate and erotic the relationship between God and humans becomes. Red's relationship with Eileen (at a stasis after twenty years of marriage) slowly reawakens and reveals an attraction with a passionate intensity.

Just as Eileen has never deserted Red despite his errancies, God does not desert Red, despite Red's many efforts to desert God. The all-consuming and forgiving nature of God's love is reflected in the passion and forgiveness of Eileen Kane. It is therefore perhaps more appropriate to see Eileen in the context of a mythic Celtic princess playing foil to Red's knight-errancy than as a dogmatic portrait of a modern woman.

The character of Red, however, is drawn quite credibly in three-dimensions because of the narrative techniques Greeley has devised for the story.



## Social Concerns

The major concerns of the novel are the lapses in intimacy, the lack of communication, and the casual adulteries which often contribute to the destruction of contemporary marriages. But *The Patience of A Saint* is also about falling in love again with one's spouse and the persistence of love despite the difficulties of marriage. Additionally, it is concerned with the notion that a successful career as well as a successful marriage demand hard work, and that both need renewal in order to avoid midlife crisis. Most of all, it is about the pursuing love of God.

The central character of the novel, Peter Redmond Kane, is a two-time Pulitzer prize-winning journalist who presently finds that he can earn a living rapping out his own daily column with very little time and even less effort. To fill the void in his work, Red smokes too much, drinks too much and has a series of casual affairs with mistresses who do not fulfill his needs.

His first child was conceived out-of-wedlock on the day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and his disillusionment with the woman he loved with passion and married for both love and the sake of honor began its slow deterioration on that very day. His problems have also been confounded by the disappearance of his journalistic hero, Paul O'Meara, outside the offices of the Chicago Herald Gazette during a snowstorm one day.

Red seems bent on self-destruction until, on the Feast of All Saints, he has a mystical experience on Chicago's Wacker Drive. Standing between the bright sky above and the cavernous and dimly lit tunnels of Lower Wacker Drive beneath, Red is hit by what he describes as a Cosmic Baseball Bat, which stops time as he knows it. He experiences a feeling of oneness with all that surrounds and is above him.

Something opens up in him, and "like a lock on the Chicago river," everything above and around him seems to flow inward. The invading love and feeling of unity Red experiences is described as "searing, dazzling, and overwhelming," and this ecstatic encounter changes Red. He quits the self-destructive behaviors of the world which wants to drag him down, sets out to trail a challenging story which could win him yet another Pulitzer Prize, becomes kindly to his coworkers, and pays attention to his long-neglected children. He falls in love again with his wife, pursuing her with erotic seductions, and experiencing the most intense sexual exchanges of his life.

Red's columns lose their cynical edge, and the earlier, idealistic and passionate Red Kane is resurrected and appears daily in both the pages of the Herald Gazette and in his bedroom. He has a blasphemous fantasy that when he is making love to Eileen he is making love to God. Eileen's passionate return of his love makes Red realize the passion of a God who would pursue him into the depths and raise him up again to the ecstasies of new quests.



As if to force yet more love out of the Cosmic Bat Wielder as he continues to force yet more passion out of both himself and Eileen, Red tries to resurrect his old self when some of the quests he has undertaken appear to be failing. He returns to his gruff behavior, his smoking, drinking and cynical worldviews, only to find that he can walk that path no more. God has grabbed Red in a passionate embrace, and despite Red's human failings, God will not let this beloved Red go.



# Techniques

The *Patience of A Saint* opens in medias res with Red confessing to Fr.

Blackie Ryan the confusion into which his life has fallen since his ecstatic experience "on the Road to Damascus."

The short introductory chapter is filled with literary allusions which set the stage for the tale which is about to unfold. Allusions not only to the story of St. Paul, but also to Dante, Thoreau, Thurber, the Book of Job, Peter's Denial of Jesus Christ, and Shakespeare's version of Julius Caesar fill the two pages which precede the flashback to the actual opening of the story.

The chronological story line begins and ends with Red Kane's attendance at Mass. At the beginning of the novel he attends Old St. Patrick's on the Feast of All Saints, 1983, all by himself, as a way of marking the fifteenth anniversary of the death of his brother in Vietnam. During Mass he is provoked both by the priest's homily on the achievement of sanctity through everyday generosity and kindness and the even more provocative fantasies of his wife's anatomy. As he walks back to the newspaper office after Mass, a car comes straight at him, threatening eternity and reminding him of an unfinished investigation he should pursue. The combination of a near-death experience and an unfinished piece of business put Red in a reflective mood, and shortly thereafter, he hears the whooshing sound which sets off his ecstatic experience.

Interspersed with the chronological story of Red's attempt to deal with his resurrected self are glimpses into his files. Columns he has written throughout his journalistic career, clippings he has saved about himself, and autobiographical fragments he has jotted down reveal the rise and fall of his idealism and his growing cynicism towards everything — including love. These plot strands are in turn woven together with a subplot which sends Red on a daring journalistic expose, blending the various parts of the novel into a mixture of mystery, adventure and romance.

The conclusion of the story finds Red at Christmas Midnight Mass in his parish church, surrounded by his family, and desperately trying to kill the self he resurrected less than two months before. But as the choir begins the processional hymn, *Adeste Fidelis*, and Eileen reaches to put her arm around him, Red hears the same swooshing sound he heard on Wacker Drive, "a sound that was not a sound.... Some warm-breasted, brightwinged Character swinging a cosmic baseball bat. Again."

# Themes

While the novel is concerned with the social issues of midlife crisis and the stagnation of both a marriage and a career, it is much more concerned with the spiritual intervention in such a life. The theme of the novel is perhaps most potently expressed by Eileen's brother, Fr. Blackie Ryan, a character often used by Greeley to deliver "sermons" to characters who are in need of them. At the height of Red's confusion about his newly resurrected self (and on the brink of letting the comfort of his old self re-emerge), Fr.

Blackie defines sainthood for Red as "excelling in the demands of everyday life," something which Red's reborn self has been doing. Blackie also reminds him that his reawakened passion for Eileen is a part of this same saintly grace. "Husband and wife," expounds Blackie, "are sacraments of God for one another, the best hint each will ever have in this world of what God is like."

## Key Questions

A reader needs to be neither Catholic nor Irish to form strong opinions concerning Andrew Greeley's novels.

Discussions can center on both the manner of his storytelling and the content he presents. Because of this, they can serve as excellent exercises in how various and often opposing literary opinions can be formed, and whether or not they are supported by valid or invalid evidence.

And because so much of what he writes is drawn from his own research, Greeley can also serve as a springboard from fiction into other genres. The seeds of his novels can be found in many of his sociological and theological books as well as in his poetry and personal journals. In many cases, actual scenes from the novels can be traced quite directly to passages in his other writings. "Fiction is the best way of getting . . . insights through the secular barriers into general culture," he has said. Greeley's works can provoke an interesting debate about why a writer whose works are grounded in the empirical data he uncovers might be called unrealistic by critics.

1. In the promotional materials released prior to the publication of *The Patience of A Saint*, Andrew Greeley referred to it as his "most erotic novel." Yet the sexual scenes take place within the context of a marriage. Does this make the novel more or less erotic than the adulterous sex scenes in *Thy Brother's Wife* or other popular novels?
2. In the sociological research he has done on sexual intimacy within marriage, Andrew Greeley has found that lasting marriages are those in which the couples do fall periodically out of love, but then rediscover each other and fall in love again. How would your experience or that of your family members or close acquaintances validate or invalidate the love story and behaviors of Red and Eileen Kane?
3. In his research on paranormal and mystical experiences, Andrew Greeley has discovered that they are not as rare as they might be imagined. Part of Red's ecstatic experience is also triggered by a near-death experience. Using the description of what Red experiences in Chapter 1 of the novel, compare what you know from your own or others' experiences to Red's. Consider the lifestyle changes his experience triggered and the ones you know similar experiences triggered in the lives of others. Apply these reflections to a consideration of how realistic a novel *The Patience of A Saint* is.
4. Are there levels on which *The Patience of A Saint* does not work as a realistic novel? If so, what are the features which lead you to make this judgment? In what places might the novel best be read as contemporary Irish epic mythology rather than realism? (You may want to read Greeley's first novel, *The Magic Cup* [1979], in order to fully understand the idea of the quest theme and the search for a "magic princess.")
5. One book reviewer (apparently tired of reading Greeley's stories about Chicago Irish), advised that he had to learn to stop seeing Chicago as the center of the universe. Yet





another implied that his "Irish ethnocentrism" was annoying. And upon reading the manuscript of his novel *Irish Gold* (a large part of which concerns the Easter Rising which led to the formation of the Irish Republic), a New York editor remarked, "It's about the Irish. Who wants to read about them?" Focusing upon other authors who write about a particular region or about the history and oppression of particular racial or ethnic groups, discuss the kind of worldview which might provoke such comments.

6. Andrew Greeley has disclosed that a noted actor and director was once reading *The Patience of A Saint* for consideration as a film. A noted actress has expressed to him an interest in starring in a production of his novel *Angel Fire* (1988). Greeley originally wrote his novel *Love Song* (1989) as a screenplay and has written a treatment of *The Cardinal Virtues* (1990, a novel about a parish priest and the life of his parish) as a pilot for a television series.

Focusing primarily on *The Patience of A Saint*, consider its possibilities as a film. What might make it a box office success? What might prevent it from becoming one?

## Literary Precedents

While *The Patience of a Saint* is similar to Greeley's "Passover Trilogy" in its mix of historical times and personages with elements of both romance and myth, this novel and the others which comprise the books in the series "The Time Between the Stars" is notable for its creation of clans of characters who appear in major and minor roles throughout the series. Coupled with the use Greeley makes of Chicago, and many of the symbolic explorations of specific sites within the city which he employs (Red's conversion experience between the worlds of Upper and Lower Wacker Drive, for example), both the novel and the series of which it is a part are reminiscent of such works as William Faulkner's sagas of Yoknapatawpha County and Garrison Keillor's morality tales of Lake Wobegon.

Greeley's emphasis on Irish Catholic families who inhabit a neighborhood and make it their own is rooted in a blend of Chicago Catholic practice (where there is one Catholic Church for nearly every square mile) and Celtic tribal instinct. And he does suggest through his sociological research (and implicit comments in an unpublished interview) that his stories bear a concern to finding one's roots and identity as much as any other ethnic or racial novelist who has written in the twentieth century, and that the discovery of Irish roots and attitudes is as valid a dig as any other.

## Related Titles

The *Patience of a Saint* is part of a series of novels set in a time frame between 1933 and 1992. The series is called "The Time Between the Stars," Greeley explains, because these dates are represented on the flag of the city of Chicago by the fourth (and what should have been the fifth) star. The world of these novels is inhabited by three families — the Ryans, the Collinses, and the Caseys — who represent the social and religious evolution of Chicago Irish Catholics which Greeley has observed during his lifetime. The Ryan family's patriarch, Ned, was a naval hero in World War II. He is characterized as a shrewd, gentle, kindly man who married a mercurial and passionate woman named Kate Collins.

Their children represent the rise of the Irish to the ranks of the well-educated and the politically powerful elite: psychiatrist Mary Kate Ryan Murphy; lawyer and subsequently federal judge Eileen Ryan Kane; and rector of Chicago's Holy Name Cathedral and subsequently one of the city's auxiliary bishops, Reverend John Blackwood Ryan, Ph.D.

Father/Bishop Blackie Ryan has become the central figure of the saga, weaving in and out of all of the books and holding the stories together. In addition, he has become the protagonist of his own series of mystery stories, the titles of which reference the eight beatitudes of Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

This series of novels is also characterized by the presence of Greeley's most powerful silent character — the city of Chicago. The city's landscape and unique character permeate the novels, piquing the characters' quests, enhancing their conflicts, and providing the clans with a very tribal sense of place.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994