Perfection Study Guide

Perfection by Mark Helprin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Perfection Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....6

Characters....10

Themes....14

Style....16

Historical Context....18

Critical Overview....21

Criticism....22

Critical Essay #1....23

Adaptations....27

Topics for Further Study....28

Compare and Contrast....29

What Do I Read Next?....31

Further Study....32

Bibliography....33

Copyright Information....34

Introduction

“Perfection,” by Mark Helprin, was published in the 2004 collection *The Pacific and Other Stories*. The protagonist, a Hasidic Jewish boy called Roger Reveshze, lives in post–World War II Brooklyn and becomes the unlikely ally of the New York Yankees baseball team in helping them out of a string of defeats. Roger is physically puny and knows nothing about baseball but draws his power from a divine source (angels help him hit the ball out of the stadium). This agency is available to him because of his extraordinary piety and devotion to perfection in his own life. In the greater scheme of things, his unusual abilities are portrayed as a God-given compensation for the Holocaust, in which he lost his parents in horrific circumstances. Rejecting the cynicism of much twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature, Helprin invokes such traditional themes as the perfection of God’s ordering of creation, the inspirational quality of the life lived with honor and integrity, and the limitations of materialism.

Author Biography

Mark Helprin was born on June 28, 1947, in New York City, the son of Morris, a motion picture executive, and Eleanor Helprin. He was raised in New York City, the Hudson River Valley, and the British West Indies. He received his undergraduate degree from Harvard College in 1969. While he was an undergraduate, at the age of twenty-one, he sold his first story to the *New Yorker*. He received a master's degree in Middle Eastern studies from Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 1972 and then did postgraduate work at Oxford University in England and at Princeton and Columbia in the United States. He has served in the British Merchant Navy, and from 1972 to 1973, he served in the Israeli infantry and the Israeli Air Force. On June 28, 1980, he married Lisa Kennedy, a tax lawyer and a vice president of Chase Manhattan Bank. As of 2006, they were still married.

Helprin believes that his work speaks for itself and seldom talks about it or about himself. However, he has described himself as Jewish by birth and by faith, though not in the orthodox tradition, and depicts his books as religious. Politically, he labels himself a Republican. He has also spoken about his pursuit of exceptional experiences; he is a skilled mountain climber.

Three quotations from Helprin collected in John Affleck's dissertation, "Birds of a Feather: The Ancient Mariner Archetype in Mark Helprin's 'A Dove of the East' and *A Soldier of the Great War*," shed light on Helprin's motivation in writing and on his choice of themes. Affleck cites Helprin as writing that he loves literature "not only because it is so pleasingly beautiful, but because it is so deeply consequential." Affleck adds that in an epigram to *A Dove of the East and Other Stories*, Helprin quotes Dante in Italian: "*amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare*," (love moved me, and makes me speak). Finally, Affleck cites Helprin's remark to a *Paris Review* interviewer:

I write in service of illumination and memory. I write to each into "the blind world where no one can help." I write because it is a way of glimpsing truth. And I write to create something of beauty.

From 1985 to 2000, Helprin wrote political opinion pieces for the *Wall Street Journal*; he was appointed a contributing editor to the *Journal* in 1991. He has also published stories and essays on politics and aesthetics in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Criterion*, *Commentary*, the *New York Times*, the *National Review*, *American Heritage*, and *Forbes ASAP*. During the 1996 U.S. presidential election campaign, it was revealed that Helprin had written the nomination acceptance speech of Republican Party candidate Bob Dole. As of 2006, he was a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank.

Helprin's books include *A Dove of the East and Other Stories* (1975), the novel *Refiner's Fire: The Life and Adventures of Marshall Pearl, a Foundling* (1977), the critically acclaimed *Ellis Island and Other Stories* (1981), the novel *Winter's Tale* (1983), the children's book *Swan Lake* (1989), and the highly praised *A Soldier of the Great*

War (1991). Thereafter followed two children's books, both with illustrations by Chris Van Allsburg, *A City in Winter: The Queen's Tale* (1996) and *The Veil of Snows* (1997). *The Pacific and Other Stories*, which contains the story "Perfection," was published in 2004, and *Freddy and Fredericka* in 2005.

Helprin's work has garnered many awards. He received a PEN/Faulkner Award, the National Jewish Book Award, and an American Book Award nomination in 1982, all for *Ellis Island and Other Stories*. In the same year, he was awarded the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Prix de Rome. In 1984, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. His novel for young adults, *A City in Winter: The Queen's Tale*, won a World Fantasy Award for Best Novella, World Fantasy Convention in 1997. In 2001, the Center for Security Policy gave Helprin a Mightier Pen Award.

Plot Summary

“Perfection” opens in the Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn in June 1956 but immediately flashes back a year to March 1955, to the incident that sets off the events of the story, when “the Saromsker Rebbe opened the wrong drawer.” (Rebbe is the Hasidic Jewish word for rabbi, which means spiritual teacher or master while Saromsker refers to the Hasidic dynasty or family group from which the rebbe descends.) The Saromsker Rebbe’s family had taken in many children who survived the Holocaust though their parents had not.

The events leading up to the drawer incident are described. The Saromsker Rebbe wishes to telephone another rabbi to discuss a theological point. But snow has snapped some telephone lines, so the Saromsker Rebbe puts his points in a letter and asks one of his students which student may be trusted to take the message to the other rabbi. The student recommends Roger Reveshze, a fourteen-year-old boy who escaped the Majdanek Nazi extermination camp in Poland and spends much time praying for his parents. The student says Roger is suitable for the errand as he is extraordinarily fast and has unusual spiritual purity. The Saromsker Rebbe summons Roger and asks him what he sees when he closes his eyes. Roger describes a scene in Eastern Europe with an old man (probably his father) with snow settling on his hat.

Looking for sealing wax for his letter, the Saromsker Rebbe opens a drawer of his desk. It is the wrong drawer, and when he sees what is in it, he rapidly slams it shut, though not before Roger catches sight of it. It is a box marked with the brand name “Lindt,” a kind of Swiss chocolate which is non-kosher.

Roger reflects that the Saromsker Rebbe has eaten non-kosher food over time, lied, and concealed his sin from his followers. Roger concludes the rebbe is imperfect. Roger hates lying because it weakens a person against worse evils. He knows what happened to his parents and others in the Holocaust, and he is determined to bear witness to this truth until he dies. He aims for perfection in this aspect of his life, in the conviction that his persistence and love will lead to reunion with his parents in the afterlife. The Saromsker Rebbe’s lie tells Roger that the rebbe cannot be trusted to study current affairs honestly and sense when there may be another impending holocaust. Roger decides that he himself must listen to the radio. His classmate Luba, who works for the butcher, Schnaiper, tells him that in the butcher’s shop there is a radio that cannot be turned off. Roger arranges to do Luba’s job in order to listen to the radio.

Roger hears an entrancing narrative on the radio. Schnaiper tells him that it is a baseball game taking place in “the House That Ruth Built.” This is a popular nickname for Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, after the famous baseball player for the Yankees, Babe Ruth, the nickname of George Herman Ruth Jr. (1895–1948). Roger, in his ignorance of U.S. culture, believes that it is a reference to Ruth, the supposed author of the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. Ruth is celebrated by Jews as a convert to Judaism as well as for being the great-grandmother to King David of Israel (c. 1011 b.c.e.–971 b.c.e.), from whose lineage Jews believe that the Messiah will come.

Roger is excited that there is a place in the Bronx with a direct link to the Israelites. He asks Luba about it, and Luba solemnly describes his fantasy as if it were reality. He envisions a huge sacred construction, lit by divine light and filled with beautiful women who are descended from Ruth. There are rabbis reading sacred Jewish texts, Jewish bands playing music for dancing, and endless supplies of Jewish food. Luba says that no one can go there except if they die, when they are taken there on a sled, or the women are in danger and need a champion to save them. In his Western mind, Roger knows that what Luba says is impossible, but in his Eastern mind, he knows that rabbis and mystics could defy gravity and fly.

From his time spent in Schnaiper's shop listening to baseball games on the radio, Roger emerges with the garbled message that the Yenkiss (the Yankees) are suffering a string of defeats, and even with the great Mickey Mental (the real-life player Mickey Mantle, 1931–1994) on their team, the Kansas City team could easily "kill" them.

After much prayer, Roger knows the answer. He has to save the Yankees. Dressed in his Hasidic black robes and fur hat on a hot June day, he packs a suitcase and sets off on the subway for the House of Ruth, where he is convinced that "a miracle will come." Roger arrives at the stadium and, though he has no money to buy a ticket, gets in by helping a peanut delivery man carrying in supplies. He goes to the stands and watches as Mantle and Berra (the real-life player Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, born 1925) are engaged in a practice session. Roger repeatedly calls out, "Mickey Mental!" Mantle thinks he is being mocked. He walks over to Roger and asks what he wants. Roger says that God has sent him "To lift you from the darkness of defeat," adding that he has received no specific instructions as to how. He asks Mantle where the ideal place to direct the ball is, and Mantle replies that it is over the clock and out of the stadium. Roger offers to show him how to do this. Mantle discusses the idea with Berra. Berra thinks that Roger is a "hayseed" (a mispronunciation of the word Hasid) and that Mantle is also a "hayseed" (a nickname for a person with a farming background). Based on this logic, he thinks that Roger should be allowed to try.

Berra brings out the rest of the team. Roger holds the bat aloft like a sword, and as he dances and twirls with it, the sun shines on it, and it glows. He feels love in his heart. The Yankees do not know that Roger is here to test God's justice, according to the verse from the book of Ruth, "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead." One of the coaches, Wylie, who does not believe in Roger, challenges him to hit the ball so that it knocks off the minute hand of the clock. The pitcher throws the ball, and Roger hits it so hard that it shatters into tiny particles. Roger apologizes and tries again. This time, the ball, trailing orange flame, hits the minute hand of the clock, which drops to the ground. Roger rises to each challenge the players set him, including putting a hole in the clock. Stengel (Casey Stengel, the real-life manager of the Yankees, 1890–1975) emerges and promises that if Roger can consistently hit the ball out of the stadium, he will double each player's salary and hire Roger for a million dollars a year. But if Roger fails, Stengel will not hire him, and each player will have his salary halved. Roger protests that he is not interested in money; he only wants to teach the team "to hit these objects, these . . . *balls*, with perfection."

The Yankees look on awestruck as Roger hits one ball after another out of the stadium. Roger also shows that he can make brilliant catches. Stengel bribes the witnesses to Roger's performance to keep silent, so as to maintain his team's tactical advantage. He is worried that Roger will not be able to play in the World Series because it takes place close to Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, a time of reflection and penitence that Roger is determined to observe.

Over the following weeks, the sporting and Jewish communities are surprised by the changes that take place regarding the Yankees. The hot dogs sold at the stadium are now all kosher, the stands echo with Hebrew prayers, Hasidic rabbis stand behind the umpires, the team refuses to play on Saturdays, the Jewish sabbath, and some of the players have adopted the Jewish head-covering.

The Yankees now lose by lesser margins, and the players perform better as they strive to match Roger. No one realizes that Roger closes his eyes after the pitch, feels an angel's arms take hold of the bat, and levitates slightly with joy. Hitting the ball is a mystical experience. Even with eyes closed he sees it coming, and it seems to grow and stop in front of him, asking to be hit. The angel hits the ball with great power, and it flies out of the stadium, slowly enough to be seen by an ecstatic crowd.

On the occasion of Roger's first game, his astonishing performance brings the Yankees a win over Kansas City. In the locker room after the game, the team picks Roger up and carries him about in triumph, chanting his name. He insists that they stop, because he is not responsible; God is. He also stops them from worshipping his bat. The press bursts into the locker room demanding to see Roger, but Mantle hides Roger in a laundry cart and Berra says that Roger has gone to his hometown, Milledgeville. A media storm of speculation follows about who he is and where he comes from. Roger is oblivious to the fame as his entire being is taken up with the experience of being within the embrace of an angel.

Roger's second game brings the Yankees a dramatic win over the White Sox. Stengel asks Roger to hold a clinic to teach the rest of the team how to play like he does. Roger warns him that he knows nothing about baseball but offers to teach them what he does know. The seminar takes place at the Yankees' secret practice ground. Roger tells the team that locks—both locks in doors and locks in canals—illustrate the mechanism of creation. God is perfect, and his creation is perfect, so that all fear and suffering in the world are ultimately counterbalanced, just as to allow a door lock to turn, each pin in the lock mechanism must be raised sufficiently to allow the lock to turn. Some pins are raised more, and some less. Though people live very different lives, with different levels of suffering, all are raised by God in various and invisible ways, so that the perfection of creation will not be broken. Similarly, a canal lock is a mechanism to lift or lower a boat that gets its power from the urge of all water to find its own level. People's reception of God's compensation, which is called holiness, is more real than the world itself. Roger says his strength and skill on the baseball field are supplied by God in compensation, resulting in perfection. The Yankees can tap into this, but not if their object is only to win games, which is a diminishment of God's infinite universe. Mantle asks Roger what his

object is. Roger replies, “Because of the imperfection I have seen, I live for the hope of restoration.”

Roger tells his story. Born in Majdanek, he saw so much killing that he thought it was natural. He was sustained by his parents’ love. Just before the camp was liberated by the Allies, when he was three, he and his parents were marched out to the edge of a pit. Everyone was shot except for Roger, who escaped the bullets because of his small size. A soldier threw him into the pit on top of the bodies. Gasoline was thrown onto the bodies, which were set alight, but Roger escaped. Now, all he wishes for is a sign that somewhere forward in time or beyond time there is a justice in the world that will lift up those he loves from the grave they were given.

The Yankees return from the seminar with the ruthlessness of an efficient army bent on vengeance. For two weeks, they win every game they play. They no longer care about their salaries or their standing in the league. They care only about perfection.

Roger’s last game takes place. Roger is cheered by people in the streets as well as in the stadium, which is filled to double capacity. Roger hits one ball after another out of the stadium. Everyone looks on in wonder and delight and feels as if “the world were ablaze with the light of perfection.”

Roger is happy to return to his humble home in Brooklyn and does not miss the luxury hotel in which he has been staying. He knows that the value of the Hasidic rituals and manner of dress is that they put the things of the world in their place. As the subway train twists and turns on its journey towards his home, Roger closes his eyes and sees his mother and father. He opens his eyes and reflects that what happened in the House That Ruth Built is like a song that he has been brought up to sing, in protest of mortality and for the love of God.

Characters

Berra

Berra is a fictionalized version of Lawrence “Yogi” Berra, the real-life catcher who played for the Yankees baseball team at the time in which the story is set. The real-life Berra was famous for his malapropisms and his idiosyncratic use of the English language. Helprin exploits this reputation by having his character Berra utter cryptic remarks such as, “The start of the middle is the end of the road for the beginning” and mixing up the terms “Hasid” and “hayseed.” Berra has a spiritual streak that makes him instinctively supportive of Roger from the moment when he first appears at Yankee Stadium.

Rabbi Eisvogel

Rabbi Eisvogel is a member of the Hasidic Jewish community in which Roger lives at the story’s opening. He is a wise man who allows Roger to listen to the radio in Schnaiper’s shop for long periods, even if it means missing his studies, because he knows it is important to Roger’s spiritual quest.

Luba

Luba is Roger’s classmate in the Hasidic Jewish community. He has a job in Schnaiper’s shop until Roger bribes him to let him take it over so that he can listen to the radio. After Roger hears the baseball game “from the House That Ruth Built” on the radio, he asks Luba about the House of Ruth. Luba is one of those Jews for whom “dreams are real” because they have lost everything. He has a vivid imagination and launches into a fantasy that describes Yankee Stadium as a kind of theme park dedicated to the Biblical character Ruth.

Mickey Mantle

Mickey Mantle, or Mickey Mental, as Roger calls him with his Yiddish accent, is a fictionalized version of the real-life baseball player for the Yankees. Roger begins his quest to rescue the Yankees by standing at the rail during a practice session and shouting repeatedly, “Mickey Mental!” Mantle is irritated but walks over to question Roger about why he is there. Against his better judgment, Mantle believes what Roger tells him about being sent by God to save him “from the darkness of defeat.”

Mel

Mel is a radio sports commentator (one half of the commentating duo, Red and Mel). Though they work together, both are from Alabama, and both are described as prima

donnas, Red and Mel clearly dislike one another. Their on-air bickering is temporarily interrupted by their astonishment at Roger's performance. Mel is stocky, with blue-black hair, and is portrayed as "what you might call a garage guy."

Mickey Mental

See Mickey Mantle

Red

Red is a radio sports commentator (one half of the commentating duo, Red and Mel). Red is red-haired and thin, high strung, and aristocratic.

Roger Reeves

See Roger Reveshze

Roger Reveshze

Roger, the protagonist, is a fourteen-year-old Hasidic Jew who, at the story's opening in 1955, lives in a Hasidic community in Brooklyn. He is described as a strange-looking boy with "wild eyes, big ears, and big teeth." He is physically undersized, even puny, and what certain children might call a "spastic." Nevertheless, he is deemed remarkable by his classmates and the elders of his community because of his extraordinary speed and his great spiritual purity. His piety and devotion to God have given him access to ecstatic spiritual states. When he prays, his body defies gravity and he spins head-over-heels and sees light.

Roger has a horrific past, having been born in and narrowly escaped from a Nazi extermination camp where he witnessed his parents and everyone he knew being murdered by the Nazis. Since then, Roger has devoted his life to praying for his parents' souls, seeking some compensation for their terrible deaths. He is devout yet intellectually independent, so he is ready to question the authority of the Saromsker Rebbe when he discovers that he has been eating non-kosher chocolate and soon sets out to remedy the imperfection that has crept into his life as a result of the rebbe's lie. Roger is a seeker after perfection, both in his own life and in the universe as a whole. Like many Jews who have lost everything (according to the story), he is susceptible to glorious dreams and is inspired to go to help the Yankees out of their run of defeats because he believes that they inhabit the divinely sanctioned "House That Ruth Built."

Roger has another motive for helping the Yankees. In the Hasidic tradition of spiritual mischief, he wants to challenge God. God, he feels, must compensate him for the deaths of his parents. Though people can be cast down by suffering, he believes, the perfection of creation demands that God raise them up by a sufficient degree to

compensate for the suffering. God does not disappoint Roger. While Roger knows nothing about baseball, by drawing upon the infinite skill and power of angels, he is able to hit ball after ball out of the stadium. In the short time that he plays for the Yankees, he inspires the team to pursue perfection over and above all material considerations and brings a glimpse of perfection to thousands of awed spectators.

Roger's unimpressive physique, his ignorance of baseball, and even the Hasidic dress in which he introduces himself to the Yankees and which is completely unsuited to sports activity, are set against his extraordinary performance on the baseball field. The gap between the two is both a source of the story's comedy and emblematic of the nature of divine grace, which, the story suggests, ignores rational and logical considerations and works according to its own immutable laws.

During his time playing for the Yankees, he is given the more Anglo-Saxon-sounding name, Roger Reeves.

Saromsker Rebbe

The Saromsker Rebbe is a member of the Hasidic Jewish community in which Roger lives at the story's opening. His family has rescued numerous Holocaust survivors. A man of considerable spiritual insight, he questions Roger and is quick to see his spiritual purity. However, he has neglected his own religious duties by eating non-kosher chocolate and lying about it. He has allowed imperfection to enter his life. His character is not examined further, his role in the story being to provide the catalyst for Roger's quest for perfection.

Schnaiper

Schnaiper is a butcher who serves the Hasidic Jewish community in which Roger lives. Schnaiper in unique in the community in that he has a radio, and Roger takes a job in his shop so that he can listen to it. The radio is always tuned to a baseball game, which Schnaiper tries to explain to Roger.

Stengel

Stengel is a fictionalized version of Casey Stengel, the real-life manager of the Yankees baseball team at the time in which the story is set. He is a cynical businessman who thinks in financial and material terms. When he first sees Roger, he promises that if Roger can consistently hit the ball out of the stadium, he will double each player's salary and hire Roger for a million dollars a year. But if Roger fails, Stengel will not hire him, and each player will have his salary halved. Stengel finds it hard to understand that Roger is not motivated by money and even harder to understand that Roger will not play in the World Series because God told him not to play during Rosh Hashana, a Jewish time of penitence.

Wylie

Wylie is one of the Yankees' coaches. "Mean and small of soul," he is the most cynical character in the story. He claims that Roger is using tricks to fool people into thinking that he is striking the minute hand off the clock or hitting balls out of the stadium.

Themes

The Importance of Truth

The events of the story are set in motion by Roger's discovery of the Saromsker Rebbe's imperfection—his deception about eating non-kosher chocolate. Roger has witnessed an extreme "imperfection," the Holocaust in which his parents were murdered. He knows that he can no longer trust the Saromsker Rebbe to bear witness to the truth with the absolute integrity needed to avoid another Holocaust. He himself intends to bear witness to the truth of the Holocaust until the day he dies. In order to know the truth of the current political situation, he listens to the radio, but what he learns leads him to another task: saving the Yankees from a string of defeats. In a broader sense, Roger lives his life in accordance with the truth, in that he is incapable of lying. He knows that a lie is the beginning of the breakdown of integrity, "the outrider of malevolent forces, which come first with a lie so that they might not have to fight to subdue you."

In this story, there are different types of truth. Rational truth is shown to be extremely limited, in that something can be spiritually true but rationally ludicrous. An example is Roger's belief, reinforced by Luba's fantasy, that Yankee Stadium is "the House That Ruth Built" in the biblical sense. While this is not true, it inspires Roger to become a champion of perfection for the Yankees.

The Perfection of God's Creation

Roger is prompted to set out on his quest to save the Yankees by the Saromsker Rebbe's imperfection. Roger believes that "The balances of the universe are precise and delicate. . . . One uncourageous lie destroys the core of the imagination." The balance of the universe demands that someone—in this case, Roger—must express the perfection that is truth. Despite knowing nothing about baseball and being physically frail, Roger is able to help the Yankees because he devotes his life to perfection, which involves a commitment to truth and to God. The image to which he clings in this quest is the resurrection of those who are gone, including his parents, somewhere in future time or beyond time: "All was grace and perfection there, all just and redeemed, all prayer answered, ratios exact, rhythms perfect, law obeyed." The spiritual lifting up of those who have met with a terrible death, and of himself, is seen by Roger as divine compensation for the horror of the Holocaust and an affirmation of God's perfect ordering of creation. When he arrives at Yankee Stadium, he is testing God's justice, challenging him to provide such compensation, and God does not let him down. Drawing upon the power of angels, Roger accomplishes marvelous feats on the baseball pitch that enable the Yankees to win and also teaches them, and the audiences in the stadium, the importance of commitment to perfection.

Closely related to the theme of the perfection of God's creation is the theme of the glory and beauty of creation. It is the Hasidic belief that God is immanent in, but also transcendent beyond, every part of creation. An example of such awareness occurs when Roger looks out from his hotel room on a glorious sunset and feels no personal pride in his accomplishments, only a reminder of the "kind of high glory that rides from place to place and time to time on a shower of sparks."

The Power of Holiness and the Limitations of Materialism

The unlikely premise of "Perfection" is that a physically weak, bookish, and unworldly Hasidic boy can single-handedly save the Yankees baseball team from a losing streak by his extraordinary performance on the field. The paradox is reinforced by the stereotypical image that prevails about Jewish boys: that while they may excel at intellectual and artistic pursuits, they are less likely to excel at sports. The narrator underscores this message in the following passage: "Jews couldn't hit, never could. Their job in the mystery of things was to take on the kidney a baseball thrown by a tall Irishman or a giant Pole." In other words, their role in creation up to now (until Roger's epiphany) has been to miss hitting balls thrown at them and be bashed on the kidney by the ball. The prevailing stereotype is also that the guy who is good at jock-type activities is likely to be a big Irishman or a Pole. The effect of this improbable plot is to displace reason and logic (which define the material world) and to announce to the reader that another law applies. This law, the story suggests, is the infinite grace of God and, by extension, the infinite possibilities open to a person who perfectly aligns his or her life and will with God.

How People Deal with Loss

Roger lost his parents and everyone he knew in the extermination camp at Majdanek. He copes with this loss by focusing on the image of his parents restored to glory in some future time or some place beyond time. He tells the Yankees: "Because of the imperfection I have seen, I live for the hope of restoration. That's all I live for, even if it be a sin." Hoping is one way of dealing with loss; another way is dreaming. The author suggests that for Jews, many of whom at certain times in history have lost everything, dreams are a vital part of real life: "for those who have nothing, dreams are real." Luba's dream-like fantasy about the House That Ruth Built in the Bronx inspires Luba and causes Roger to respond to its elevated tone by spiritually rising to the occasion and saving the Yankees.

Style

Magical Realism

This story has little in common with those works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction which tend to emphasize realism, moral ambiguity, doubt, and cynicism. But it has strong elements of the genre known as magical realism, in which magical or supernatural elements (such as Roger's divinely assisted feats in baseball) appear in an otherwise realistic setting and in which all elements are treated as real.

Symbolism

Symbolism occurs in literature when something is used to represent something else, often when a material object represents both itself and something immaterial. Throughout "Perfection," Roger is surrounded by images of light and elevation, which symbolize his spiritual illumination and exaltation. With regard to light, a student tells the Saromsker Rebbe of Roger, "When he prays, white light bathes the walls." When Roger, with the help of an angel, hits balls out of the Yankee Stadium, they trail orange flame.

With regard to elevation, both in Brooklyn and while he stays in a luxury hotel, Roger inhabits the upper floors of tall buildings. In addition, Roger is frequently connected with birds in the story, which are creatures that inhabit the heavens and, like the angels that help him play baseball, have wings.

Metaphor

A metaphor is a similarity drawn between one thing and another to which it is not literally applicable. In this story, Roger uses metaphors of locks (both on doors and in canals) to describe the perfection of the mechanisms of God's creation. Military metaphors are used to suggest the war between good and evil that is played out in the events of the story.

The assumptions underlying Roger's lock metaphors are that God is perfect and that his creation is perfect, so all fear and suffering in the world are ultimately counterbalanced. Injustices are corrected, but sometimes this happens far away from people in space and time, so that they cannot see the mechanism in its entirety. All souls are equal in the eyes of God, and everyone finally comes to the same reward. To allow a door lock to turn, each pin in the lock mechanism must be raised sufficiently to allow the lock to turn. Some pins are raised more, and some less. Though a beggar lives a different life from a king, both "are lifted by God variously and invisibly, but equally, even in this world, so that the perfection will not be broken." Similarly, a canal lock is a mechanism to lift or lower a boat that gets its power from the urge of all water to find its own level. In life, those who suffer know, too, the level of compensation they acquire. The reception of this compensation, which is called holiness, is more real than the world itself. Roger's

extraordinary feats on the baseball field, accomplished with the help of angels, are a divine compensation for the horrors he has suffered in the Holocaust.

Military metaphors are apt for a story that takes place against the historical background of the Holocaust of World War II. Roger and his allies are seen as warriors against evil and materialism. Luba talks of the rescuer of the inhabitants of the House That Ruth Built—the role that Roger takes on—as a "champion." This champion, says Luba, "must have great virtue, for he will carry in his hand the very staff of the Lord." This language connotes both scenes from the Old Testament and the Western European tradition of a chivalrous knight, called a champion, who fights for God, virtue, and truth. Helprin's invocation of the tradition of chivalry also has the effect of distancing his story from the cynical, materialistic outlook of much twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature. It hearkens back to an age which, it is suggested, valued truth, honor, and spiritual purity.

Military metaphors are also used to describe the Yankees after their transformative seminar with Roger. They seem no longer mere baseball players, but "soldiers," and they are referred to by the press as "The Invincible Engine," like some lethal military killing machine. Galvanized by Roger's account of his response to the Holocaust, they are "bent on a certain kind of vengeance"; they want "only to play to perfection" and "to speak directly to God, and to face like men the fact of evil and sorrow in the world." The suggestion is that they have, in some sense, become warriors for good against evil.

Humor

The story contains much comedy, most notably in the unexpected image of an undersized Hasidic boy in traditional dress showing the Yankees how to hit a ball out of the stadium. The bizarre juxtaposition helps to break the boundaries of reason and to open the reader's awareness to a reality beyond reason. But sometimes, the humor has a darker hue. When Roger plays for the Yankees against Kansas City, the Orthodox Jewish contingent in the stands fears lest "he would be the reason for the defeat of this otherwise invincible gentile team . . . and that this might result in a pogrom." As the Yankees win, while the gentiles "shook the pillars of the world with their shouts . . . the Jews prayed silently, thankful to have been spared." This is a joke, of course, because it is unlikely that another Holocaust could result from a Jewish boy's letting down the Yankees in a baseball game. But the humor has a serious point. During a baseball game or any sporting event, a crowd can be whipped up into a highly emotional and irrational state, overwhelmed with suddenly felt hostilities. It is just such emotion that Hitler succeeded in manipulating to gain support for his anti-Semitic policies, of which the Holocaust was the extreme example (it is no coincidence that Hitler often used large sports stadiums similar to Yankee Stadium for his rallies). Many Jewish people are sensitive to such irrational winds of change, as they fear they could be forerunners of a new Holocaust.

Historical Context

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is the name given to the genocide of the Jews and other minority groups and so-called undesirables carried out by Nazi Germany and its allies during World War II (1939–1945). It is estimated that around six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust in what the Nazis called the final solution of the Jewish question or the cleaning. The Nazis promoted the belief that the Jews were a physically and morally inferior group that should be exterminated. Hundreds of thousands of Jews perished in the extermination camps set up in Germany and collaborating countries by the Nazis. Early on in the war, as happened to Roger's parents, many were marched to the edge of a pit, where they were shot, a method later found to be too costly a use of ammunition. The pit was then filled in by bulldozers. Later when the Nazis wanted to speed up the killing and use a cheaper method, death camp prisoners were gassed in custom-made chambers with a common delousing poison, zyklon B.

Minority groups murdered by the Nazis in extermination camps included Roma (gypsies), Poles, Serbs, homosexuals, mentally and physically disabled people, communists, dissidents and intellectuals, black people, resistant Catholic and Protestant clergy, and various criminals. Taking these groups into account brings most estimates of those killed in the Holocaust to an estimated eleven million.

The Nazi extermination camp at Majdanek, where Roger was born and where he witnessed his parents being murdered, was two miles from the Polish city Lublin. It was one of two camps where zyklon B was used in the gas chambers, though carbon monoxide was also used. According to data from the Majdanek State Museum, about 300,000 inmates passed through the camp, of whom over 40 percent were Jews. It is estimated that around 100,000 Jews lost their lives there, half dying from disease, exhaustion, and harsh conditions, and half being executed or gassed.

Holocaust Denial

Some people do not believe that the Jews were killed in an event of genocide during World War II. People who do not believe the Holocaust occurred are commonly called Holocaust deniers, but they themselves generally favor the term Holocaust revisionists. Key beliefs of Holocaust deniers include rejecting the fact that the Nazi government had a deliberate policy of targeting Jews for extermination; that around six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust; and that mass extermination of Jews occurred in camps designed for that purpose. Some Holocaust deniers claim that the gas chambers found in the camps after the end of the war were for delousing inmates and that the camps were for prisoners of labor and not for extermination. In the last decade of the twentieth century, some commentators claimed that Jews invented or exaggerated the Holocaust for financial or political gain. They coined the term, Holocaust industry, to describe this

notion. In “Perfection,” the character of Roger is placed in opposition to Holocaust deniers, in that he is determined to “bear witness” to the truth of the death of his parents and so many others, “even as others might forget, ridicule, dismiss, or demean it.”

In many countries, Holocaust denial is illegal. In 2005, British historian David Irving was sentenced to three years imprisonment in Austria based on books he had written and speeches he had given claiming the scale of the extermination of Jews in World War II was exaggerated, that Hitler knew nothing of the Holocaust, and that there had been no gas chambers at the Auschwitz camp. In 1998, Irving launched an unsuccessful libel suit against U.S. academic Deborah Lipstadt and her publisher. The presiding judge, Charles Gray (as reported in the *Guardian Unlimited* article, “The Ruling against David Irving: Excerpts from High Court Judge Charles Gray’s Ruling in the David Irving Libel Suit”), ruled that characterizations that Irving is a “Holocaust denier,” that he is “anti-Semitic,” and that he has “for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence” were “substantially true.” The case also demanded that the judge rule on the truth or otherwise of the events of the Holocaust itself. After hearing evidence from both sides, the judge concluded, “It is my conclusion that no objective, fair-minded historian would have serious cause to doubt that there were gas chambers at Auschwitz and that they were operated on a substantial scale to kill hundreds of thousands of Jews.”

Hasidic Judaism

Hasidic Judaism, of which Roger is an adherent, is a form of Haredi Judaism, which in turn is sometimes known as Ultra-Orthodox Judaism. The word, Hasidic (Chasidic is an alternative spelling) derives from the Hebrew word for “piety.” Hasidic Judaism was founded by Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer (1698–1760), a mystic who is commonly referred to by Hasidic Jews as the Baal Shem Tov (generally translated as Master of the Good Name), or as Besht for short. Hasidic Judaism stresses joy, faith, and ecstatic prayer, accompanied by song and dance, and places religious exaltation above intellectual knowledge. One of its central beliefs is that the entire universe is a manifestation of God but that God also transcends the universe. This belief tends to give rise to optimism about the human condition, as it teaches that everyone and everything possesses a divine spark in which God is manifested.

Hasidic beliefs and practices are expressed in “Perfection” in Roger’s love for, and wonder at, the marvels of creation; in his sensitivity to visions of “the House That Ruth Built” as being filled with music and dance; in his easy familiarity with ecstatic states; and in his assumption that he and, ultimately, the Yankees can reflect divine perfection in the relatively mundane act of playing baseball.

Hasidic dress is distinctive. Hasidic men usually wear a black hat and black clothes with a white shirt, and on the sabbath they wear a black satin or silk robe with a prayer belt. In common with other Jews, Hasidic Jews follow dietary laws, and food produced in line with these laws is called kosher. In “Perfection,” under Roger’s influence, some Jewish

rules of dress are adopted by the Yankees baseball team, and some of the dietary rules are followed within the stadium, shocking the media and the public.

Critical Overview

Helprin published *The Pacific and Other Stories*, the collection in which “Perfection” appears, in 2004, after a seven-year absence from fiction publishing. The critical reception was mostly positive, although Helprin’s embrace of such old-fashioned themes as beauty, truth, and honor, and his affirmation of moral absolutes, was not universally admired.

In his mostly enthusiastic review for *Newsday* entitled “Glimpses of Lives Honed on Honor,” Dan Cryer remarks that Helprin is an “unabashed cultural conservative” who writes about “great qualities” without irony or “the wink of postmodernist qualification.” While he calls the collection “uneven,” Cryer notes that it has a coherent theme, “the grace imparted by a life honed on honor.” He singles out “Perfection” as an “exuberant story” and “one of the oddest, and funniest, of baseball stories,” combining magical realism with an “unabashed moral focus.” Overall though, Cryer’s main criticism of the collection is that sometimes the stories fall into “heavy-handed didacticism.”

Michiko Kakutani, in his review for the *International Herald Tribune*, was less impressed. Kakutani comments that “Helprin’s focus on moral absolutes seems to have hardened, if not calcified,” resulting in “heavy-handed, stage-managed fictions,” which display a “growing sanctimony.”

In her review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Fuzzy Lives in Perfect Detail: Characters Act Precisely as They Seek Redemption,” Jennie Yabroff highlights a feature of the stories that is simultaneously a strength and a weakness. “God,” she writes, “is in Helprin’s details.” She praises Helprin’s precise and lucid descriptions of how things work (examples might include Roger’s explanation of how canal locks and door locks work and the narrator’s detailed description of a baseball game) but feels that the characters lack emotional depth. Pointing out that “Most of his male characters are uncommonly brave,” she comments: “Helprin becomes a generalist when writing about how people operate. His stories read more like fables than observations of actual human behavior.”

No such reservations are recorded by the *Los Angeles Times* critic, Nick Owchar, in his review, “Appreciating Life’s Moments of Perfection.” Owchar calls the collection “splendid” and notes that it has “plenty of magic” of the “earthly, human” kind. Owchar identifies a consistent theme in the collection that also applies to “Perfection”: “attaining holiness and practicing charity in an age obsessed with science and reason. . . . Helprin presents us with people confronting life’s ugliness with small acts of perfection.” He praises “Perfection” as “exquisite,” noting that the abundant comedy in the story is “underscored by a tragic sense of cosmic balance.”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Robinson has an M.A. in English. She is a writer, editor, and former teacher of English literature and creative writing. In the following essay, Robinson explores the significance of the theme of perfection in Mark Helprin's "Perfection."

The opening incident of "Perfection" sets up the moral and spiritual framework for the entire story. A chain of events is set off when the Saromsker Rebbe opens the wrong drawer, allowing Roger to see that he has been eating non-kosher chocolate and lying about it. In the framework of Helprin's story, this imperfection creates an imbalance in the universe that has to be compensated for by a manifestation of perfection. This is less a matter of morals than it is a law of physics. The fact that the Saromsker Rebbe's offenses may have been morally forgivable is not the point. "The balances of the universe are precise and delicate. . . . One uncourageous lie destroys the core of the imagination." Roger knows that a lie is "the outrider of malevolent forces, which come first with a lie so that they might not have to fight to subdue you."

Roger's piety and devotion to perfection in his life create a moment in which the witnesses to his performance are lifted into a perception of divine order.

Roger follows this line of reasoning to its conclusion and decides that he can no longer trust the rebbe to listen to and report current affairs with truth. The rebbe could miss the signs of a future Holocaust. Roger, who saw his parents murdered in the Holocaust in horrific circumstances, has devoted his life to bearing witness to the truth of that event. Roger feels he must take over the job that the rebbe, in his imperfect life, may have done less than perfectly, and he must listen to the radio himself. In this way, he is introduced to the plight of the Yankees, whom he decides to save from a run of defeats. This resolve leads to his challenge to God on the baseball pitch, the essence of which can be summed up as follows: God's creation is a perfect mechanism comparable to a well-functioning lock, in which pins are raised and lowered just enough to allow the lock to turn. Thus God must raise up Roger in compensation for the horrors he has known in the Holocaust.

God does not fail Roger, who, in spite of knowing nothing about baseball and being physically puny, achieves inspired feats on the baseball pitch by drawing upon the power and skill of angels. No one realizes that after the pitch, Roger always closes his eyes, and "It was then that he felt the arms, fluttering and feathered, golden and shiny, reach from behind him and slowly, viscously, take hold of his hands on the bat." But onlookers do see the results in the shape of the ball flying out of the stadium, never to fall to earth. This process of divine grace not only confirms Roger's hopes of redemption, but inspires the Yankees to pursue perfection in their play. It also displays a glimpse of divine perfection to all the spectators, who experience an ecstatic joy as they watch Roger hit balls out of the stadium which fly off into the infinite heavens—and are

never seen to come down again. As for the reader, who has been told that Roger has neither the physique nor the talent for excelling at baseball, there is only one way to look for the source of his power, and that is in the direction of the divine. As Roger tells the Yankees' manager, Stengel:

I weigh thirteen and three-quarter *shvoigles*. I'm two *yumps* tall. How do you think I hit the ball out of the house? Do you think I could do such a thing alone? Who do you think is in charge here? You? Me?

It can be seen from the trajectory of these happenings that seemingly small and trivial events, such as the Saromsker Rebbe's opening the wrong drawer, can have great effects in the scheme of things, as Helprin portrays it. Thus, Helprin suggests, the ways in which a person chooses to live his life is of vital importance. It is significant that the Saromsker Rebbe, at the same time as he is neglecting truth in his life, is much occupied in pondering theological disputes. The implication is that such intellectual quibbles are as nothing compared with spiritual purity. Roger's observance of the pieties of his religion, such as not playing baseball during Rosh Hashana, the time of penitence, is part of his philosophy of not compromising and of pursuing perfection. Only such perfection will ensure an atmosphere of truth and clarity that will reveal the first approach of such dangers as another Holocaust. Catastrophes such as the Holocaust, the story suggests, can unfold from an apparently tiny lie. The historical evidence, indeed, supports such a theory, in that many commentators have remarked that the Holocaust was enabled by many small acts of deception, negligence, and denial on the part of ordinary individuals.

Versions of the notion that great consequences can spring from a person's acts and choices can be found both in physics and religion. The New Testament teaches, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Hinduism teaches the law of karma, that what a person gives out comes back to the person. This is reflected in Newton's third law of physics, that forces occur in pairs, and so for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Chaos theory in physics and mathematics is an extension of this idea. The theory tries to explain the phenomenon whereby small occurrences significantly affect the outcomes of seemingly unrelated events, leading to results which are apparently random but are in fact determined by tiny variations in the initial state. This high dependence on initial conditions is called the butterfly effect, which refers to the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere that ultimately cause a tornado or prevent it.

The equivalent in "Perfection" to the butterfly's flapping its wings is the Saromsker Rebbe opening the wrong drawer. Helprin creates a universe in which everything is minutely interconnected with everything else, giving a sense of the intelligence and unity underlying creation. However, while the term, chaos theory, tends to be associated in the layperson's mind with increasing disorder in a system (though to scientists, the theory simply explains apparently random results that are really determined and therefore not random), the theory that governs the world of "Perfection" is the opposite. Roger's piety and devotion to perfection in his life create a moment in which the witnesses to his performance are lifted into a perception of divine order. The narrator

explains, “For the moment, at least, they felt as if the deepest circles within them had been squared, their ragged doubts knit smooth, and the world were ablaze with the light of perfection.” In the intricate system of balances that makes up the universe, Roger’s actions, motivated by altruism and love for God and humanity, have served as an antidote to the chaos set off by the Saromsker Rebbe’s deception.

Helprin uses symbolism to support his portrayal of Roger as a spiritually pure human being. Roger is surrounded by images of light, suggestive of spiritual illumination. A student tells the Saromsker Rebbe of Roger, “When he prays, white light bathes the walls.” Under questioning from the Saromsker Rebbe, Roger reveals that when he prays, he is blinded by light and spins head over heels. The Saromsker Rebbe notes that at such moments, Roger’s spiritual purity makes him pass beyond the law of gravity, in the manner of the levitating mystics of historical tradition that are mentioned in the story. When Roger, with the help of an angel, hits balls out of Yankee Stadium, they trail orange flame, a sign to onlookers that something beyond the mundane is occurring.

Another symbolic thread emphasizing Roger’s spiritual status is images of elevation. On his journey to Yankee Stadium, Roger sleeps on the roof of an elevated subway station; when the Yankees accommodate him in a luxury hotel, he inhabits a room with windows “as high above the earth as an airplane.” At home in Brooklyn, Roger lives on the top floors of his building. He spends hours in prayer there and gains the knowledge that he must go to “the House of Ruth, where a miracle will come,” whereupon he comes “down from his perch.”

As well as suggesting spiritual elevation, the image of the perch connotes birds, creatures whose element is the sky. Roger is frequently connected with the imagery of birds. To persuade the Yankees out of their rationalism, Roger points out that “God shifts an untold number of birds twice a year from the top of the earth to the middle, and from the middle back to the top.” When Roger shows the Yankees his batting skills, following his miraculous hit of the minute hand of the clock, a seagull examines the broken clock, then “rose like a rocket and disappeared into the clouds.” This image foreshadows Roger’s hitting the ball so far and high that it disappears up into the heavens and is not seen to return to earth. Roger’s questioning of Berra about what lies beyond the stadium, where the balls travel (the Bronx, then Long Island Sound, then Long Island, then the ocean) has the effect of extending the reader’s boundaries towards infinity. Such images of elevation also relate to the theme of the perfection of God’s creation, whereby God raises up people in different ways to compensate for their suffering.

While such compensation may not come immediately or even within the limits of time, the story suggests the perfection of creation demands that it must eventually arrive. Indeed, if it were possible to see the entire picture at any one time, then it would be clear that the “counterweight for which we long—to right wrongs and correct injustices” is always present, though it may be far away in space or time. In Roger’s words, as his experience in the baseball stadium shows, “forward in time, or where time does not

exist, there is a justice and a beauty that will leap back to lift the ones I love from the kind of grave they were given."

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on "Perfection," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

- *The Pacific and Other Stories* was released in an unabridged version as an audio CD by Sound Library in 2004. It is narrated by William Dufris. As of 2006, it was available from amazon.com.

Topics for Further Study

• Research the Holocaust that took place during World War II. Write and give a presentation on the conditions leading up to it, what happened, and the aftereffects. Include in your presentation some ideas on how such an event might be prevented from happening again.

• Either (1) interview some survivors of the Holocaust, and/or members of a family whose parents or grandparents survived the Holocaust, about their experiences, and create a report, film, or CD based on your findings; or (2) read some firsthand accounts of survivors of the Holocaust and create a report, film or CD based on your findings.

• Read about Hasidic Judaism—its beliefs, customs, and adherents—and write an essay on the subject. If you wish, you may include quotes from, or information about, literature written by or about Hasidic Jews.

• Research areas where Hasidic Jews have set up communities. Tell the story of one such community—who set it up and why, where the community came from, and what kinds of lives its members forged in their adopted area. Information can be gathered from any source you wish, including interviews.

• Research the subject of peak experiences, which may be defined as sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, and an awareness of ultimate truth and the unity of all things. Based on your findings, give a presentation or write a poem or short story about this subject.

• Helprin is known as an author who deals in grand themes, such as love, truth, and honor. Write a story, poem, short story, or short play around one such grand theme, showing how it transforms a life or lives.

Compare and Contrast

• **1940s:** The Nazis murder approximately six million Jews, in a genocide that comes to be known as the Holocaust, in extermination camps in Germany and its allied countries.

• **1950s:** In the United States and other countries to which Jews immigrate after World War II, the Holocaust is not much discussed either within or outside Jewish circles. Jews who survive the Holocaust and immigrate to the United States are discouraged by customs officials from talking about their experiences, on the presumption that Americans are not interested.

• **Today:** The Holocaust is the subject of documentaries, films, and books and is commemorated in museums and monuments. Holocaust denial is illegal in many countries.

***

• **1940s:** The Holocaust destroys all Hasidic groups in Eastern Europe.

• **1950s:** Survivors of the Holocaust immigrate to various countries, including the United States and Israel, and establish new centers of Hasidic Judaism modeled on their original communities. In the United States, the largest communities are in Brooklyn, New York.

• **Today:** Hasidic Judaism thrives, especially in U.S. cities, with approximately 165,000 Hasidic Jews living in the New York City area. Hasidic Jews preserve the Yiddish language and many of the religious traditions of pre-Holocaust Eastern European Judaism. The American Hasidic Jewish reggae artist Matisyahu is popular. His music is primarily aimed at non-religious Jews to bring them closer to Judaism.

***

• **1940s:** Palestine is partitioned into Arab and Jewish regions, and the Jewish state of Israel is set up in 1948, largely to provide a homeland for the Jewish people where they can avoid the possibility of another Holocaust.

• **1950s:** From 1951 to 1956, hundreds of attacks on Israel are carried out by Arab resistance groups called fedayeen, operating from the Arab countries of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. In 1956, Egyptian president Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal, an international waterway through which Israeli ships passed, threatens British and French oil and trade interests in the region. In the hope of ending the fedayeen attacks, Israel joins with France and Britain in attacking Egypt, though this war ends in the same year.

- **Today:** Hostilities between Israel and neighboring Arab countries continue. Israel builds a West Bank barrier purportedly to defend the country against attacks by Palestinian groups, though opponents claim the barrier is a way for Israel to appropriate land.

What Do I Read Next?

- "Perfection" is one of the short stories collected in Helprin's *The Pacific and Other Stories* (2004). The other stories focus on honorable characters who, in the interests of honing their lives in the direction of perfection, perform extraordinarily unselfish acts.

- Helprin's acclaimed novel *A Soldier of the Great War* (2005) tells the story of a young Italian man from a privileged family who finds the direction of his life changed forever by World War I. Along the way, he loses and rediscovers love and has to find a way of reconciling his love of beauty and religious faith with the horror of war.

- *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1983) provides an exuberant exploration of Jewish life, traditions, religion, and folklore from modern New York City to the Eastern European villages of Singer's ancestors. A central theme is the power of benevolence.

- The Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel wrote a moving memoir *Night* (1982) about his teenage experience at Auschwitz with his father. The work tries to reconcile his former fervent religious belief with the horror of the Holocaust that killed his parents.

- Martin Buber's classic work *Tales of the Hasidim* (first published in German as *Die chassidischen Buecher: Gesamtausgabe* in 1928, translation by Olga Marx and published as *Tales of the Hasidim*, 1948, reprinted by Schocken, 1991) is an entertaining, thought-provoking, and inspiring collection of stories and anecdotes about the lives of the Hasidic masters.

Further Study

Buber, Martin, *The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, Routledge, 2002.

This popular book (first published in German in 1948 as *Der Weg des Menschen: Nach der chassidischen Lehre*, first English translation by Maurice Friedman published in 1950 as *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism*) presents the essential teachings of Hasidic Judaism through a collection of imaginative stories.

Dorfman, H. A., and Karl Kuehl, *The Mental Game of Baseball: A Guide to Peak Performance*, Diamond Communications, 2002.

This book, which has been highly praised in sporting circles, is aimed at players at all levels. It teaches the mental skills necessary to achieve peak performance in baseball, but the work has gained the reputation of helping people to function better in all areas of life.

Douillard, John, *Body, Mind, and Sport: The Mind-Body Guide to Lifelong Health, Fitness, and Your Personal Best*, Three Rivers Press, 2001.

Many athletes experience periods when they can do no wrong, when every hit is brilliant, when the body feels weightless, and action is effortless. This state has become known as being “in the zone” and has been likened to ecstatic spiritual experiences. In this practical guide, Douillard shows that there is nothing accidental about such experiences—they can be cultivated and are available to everyone, whatever their beginning level of fitness.

Gilbert, Martin, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War*, Owl Books, 1987.

Gilbert provides a comprehensive introduction to the history of anti-Semitism in Europe and how it culminated in the Holocaust. He describes the systematic destruction of European Jewry and the widespread disbelief that such an event could be happening.

Plato, *Plato’s Ion and Meno*, Agora Publications, 1998.

These are two of the most accessible and entertaining of Plato’s dialogs and complement Helprin’s story of Roger’s unexpected abilities on the baseball field in Helprin’s “Perfection.” In *Ion*, Socrates probes the nature and source of human creativity, concluding that it is divine and owes nothing to the personality, intellect, or moral stature of the artist. In *Meno*, Socrates investigates the source of goodness and considers the hypothesis that all knowledge is recollection of something that the soul knew before birth.

Bibliography

Affleck, John, “Birds of a Feather: The Ancient Mariner Archetype in Mark Helprin’s “A Dove of the East” and *A Soldier of the Great War*, http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/staff/kamorgan/affleck.html (accessed October 27, 2006).

Bible (King James Version), Galatians 6:7.

“Concentration Camp,” in State Museum at Majdanek website, http://majdanek.pl/en/oboz.htm (accessed October 27, 2006).

Cryer, Dan, “Glimpses of Lives Honed on Honor,” in *Newsday*, November 11, 2004, p. B04.

Helprin, Mark, “Perfection,” in *The Pacific and Other Stories*, Penguin, 2004, pp. 125–95.

Kakutani, Michiko, Review of *The Pacific and Other Stories*, in *International Herald Tribune*, November 4, 2004, p. 14.

Owchar, Nick, “Appreciating Life’s Moments of Perfection,” in *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2004, p. E7.

“The Ruling against David Irving: Excerpts from High Court Judge Charles Gray’s Ruling in the David Irving Libel Suit,” in *Guardian Unlimited*, April 11, 2000, http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0, ,3984993–103501,00.html (accessed October 27, 2006).

Yabroff, Jennie, “Fuzzy Lives in Perfect Detail: Characters Act Precisely as They Seek Redemption,” in *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 7, 2004, p. M2.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535