Philadelphia Fire Short Guide

Philadelphia Fire by John Edgar Wideman

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Characters

P hiladelphia Fire is unique in its combination of real and fictional characters, including Cudjoe, Wideman, J.B., and Caliban. Cudjoe, the fictionalized protagonist, returns from a decade in Greece to search for Simba, the shadowy survivor of the 1985 bombing of a Rastafarian cult by Philadelphis city officials. He never finds the boy, but his reflections on the city, his old neighborhood, and his own identity provide the structural basis for the narrative. Cudjoe's search for answers becomes the reader's own.

Cudjoe is a well-educated, successful writer. His self-imposed exile on the island of Mykonos is a flight from the harshness of life in Philadelphia. By leaving the country, Cudjoe avoids becoming either a drop-out like J.B., the homeless man, or a sell-out like Timbo, successful aide to the mayor.

His ambivalence about his heritage and identity also shows up in his marriage to a white woman, whom he later abandons along with their children. When he returns to Philadelphia he resolves, despite his fears, to face whatever comes.

In counterpoint to Cudjoe's search is Wideman's own quest for understanding. In Part II of the book, Wideman inserts himself into the narrative with meditations on his son, a convicted murderer. Although initially perplexing, the sections about his son are particularly moving. The boy becomes a mirror of Simba; both are lost and both have someone searching for them.

Wideman also draws attention to the creation of the narrative, using excerpts from letters to his son and from a Move member to Wideman. He wonders about Cudjoe's place in the narrative and why he keeps appearing as a character. Thus Wideman the author becomes a character in the novel, an unexpected twist in the development of the book.

Another unexpected character is Caliban, the slave from Shakespeare's The Tempest (c.1611). This Caliban is reborn, though, with traces of the "Bronx, Merry Ole England, rural Georgia, Jamaican calypso, West Coast krio, etc." in his speech. He offers his own interpretation of Prospero as a tyrant who usurped Caliban's land, in much the same way that Europeans usurped African lands. This re-making of a classical character gives another evocative dimension to the cast.

Finally, J.B., a homeless man reminiscent of King, the leader of the Move cult, acts as an apocalyptic figure at the end of the book. He tries to understand the swirl of events around him and to grab onto a symbol of order and prosperity, but he finds only chaos.

All of the major characters in Philadelphia Fire are desperate in some way.

All are confused and searching for answers. And all are disappointed and overpowered by the societal disintegration around them. The combination of fictive and autobiographical characters creates a disturbing, powerful effect.

Social Concerns

Urban disintegration is the major social issue in Philadelphia Fire, although as usual Wideman is concerned with the nature of violence, racial conflict, and in this book particularly, the future of society's children.

This account of the 1985 bombing of a Rastafarian cult by city officials in Philadelphia seems eerily familiar, given events like the raid on the David Koresh sect in Waco, Texas, or the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City. The bombing of the Move sect which haunts Wideman and the characters in the book occurred over a decade ago, but analysis of the event is as relevant as today's headlines.

Using the bombing as a touchstone, the novel explores urban disintegration in its most terrifying aspects. The deaths of eleven people, including five children, are rationalized by several characters and are in the process of being forgotten by most. Violence is rampant. The infrastructure of the city crumbles. The despair of living in urban decay is evident in small events like finding a roach in a sugar bowl, and in large events like trying to understand a son who is a murderer.

Violence is a major signifier of urban disintegration, and Philadelphia Fire supplies multiple perspectives. The violence ranges from an individual homeless man being set afire, to Wideman's rumination on his own son who is in jail for murder, to the organized attack on the Move sect.

In the midst of violence and decay, the children in the book are either bereft or rebelling. Simba, the lone boy who survived the bombing, is never seen again. Other children run in packs. Some distribute pamphlets with slogans like "Olds are Vampires. They suck youngs' blood" and "Being born is good. Growing old is bad." The vision of children and their future is one of the bleakest aspects of the book. Wideman has tapped into a volatile arena in modern society, and the social concerns which undergird the novel are real, oppressive, and in desperate need of solutions.

Techniques

Jarring may be the best word to describe the combination of techniques used by Wideman in Philadelphia Fire.

As in his previous works, he shifts narrators and combines fact with fiction. The shifts are remarkable not for their smoothness but for their jagged edges. For instance, Cudjoe, who opens the book, is suddenly replaced by Wideman in Part II, wondering about his son and asking, "Why this Cudjoe?"

The shifts in narrative point of view are not as unexpected as the variety of forms included in the novel. In this book Wideman pushes the boundaries of the genre by including essays, parables, reflections, history lessons, letters, and articles, along with exposition, description, and dialogue. The sheer variety of material is surprising.

This is not a linear novel but a collection of snapshots, a collage splattered between the covers of a book.

Wideman also blurs the distinction between fiction and fact in a deliberate, provocative way. He incorporates his own experiences in the way many writers do, by funneling them into a fictional character (Cudjoe). In addition, he inserts himself as a character.

This combination is risky because it calls attention to Wideman as author and to the text as text. It also puts him in the forefront of postmodern writers experimenting with form and genre.

The jumble of forms and narratives mirrors the jumble of society.

Themes

Given the basis of the novel, it is not surprising that its major themes revolve around despair. The overriding theme is that we are destroying ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As evidence, the book offers descriptions of the garbage we produce, in our homes and on our streets. We see instances of cyclical violence, as when Simba survives the bombing but goes on to lead a gang of violent youngsters. The city and its structures are crumbling, and no emotional tethers exist to hold people together. Societal and individual despair pervades Philadelphia Fire.

Similarly depressing is the theme of exile. Cudjoe, the initial protagonist of the book, has exiled himself to Greece for ten years before returning in search of Simba, whom he saw on the television news. Wideman, who enters the book in Part II, isolates himself in Wyoming, and his son is exiled in prison. A significant portion of the text is devoted to a discussion of The Tempest, with its variety of exiled characters. It seems that all of the people in the novel experience exile in one way or another, with concomitant facets of loneliness, fear, longing, and hopelessness.

In Philadelphia Fire, as in Wideman's other work, the personal is inextricable from the collective. The history of Wideman's son is joined with the history of the children on the streets of Philadelphia. A homeless man has his own life yet is oddly reminiscent of King, the leader of the Move sect. An informal basketball game derives from Wideman's background, serves to define Cudjoe, and is emblematic of changes in the neighborhood. In juxtaposing the personal with the social, Wideman forces the reader to acknowledge the interplay between the two.

Key Questions

In this, Wideman's most bleak look at life to date, readers may feel confused or overwhelmed. Yet Philadelphia Fire was the recipient of a PEN/Faulkner award. Wideman remains in the forefront of contemporary American writers because he ignites his work with passion. He is a virtuoso at matching forms with content; in this novel he pushes the boundaries of form and takes some risks in combining fact with fiction. He asks the reader to examine ugly realities of modern life, just as he examines them himself. Philadelphia Fire is testament to Wideman's penchant for technical experimentation and his commitment to exploring social issues through his work.

1. Is Cudjoe an admirable character?

Which qualities of his are appealing?

Which are not?

2. Compare Cudjoe and Wideman as characters. In what ways are they similar and different?

3. Look at exiled characters in the novel (Cudjoe, Wideman in Laramie, Wideman's son in prison, Prospero, Caliban). What effect has exile had on their lives?

4. What is Simba's role in the novel?

Is he a character or a symbol?

5. Examine the passages which describe the city. What portrait is offered of Philadelphia?

6. What view of children does Wideman offer? Consider Cudjoe's children, Wideman's son, Kaliban's Kiddie Korps.

7. All of the main characters are men. What role do women play in the book?

8. Some critics have called Philadelphia Fire a confusing book. Are there places where the shifts are disconcerting or the narrative becomes confusing?

9. Compare Wideman's look at the Move bombing with similar eruptions in past years (the raid on David Koresh's group in Waco or the Oklahoma City bombing). How would you describe the power relations between dissident groups and government?

10. Wideman seems to argue that we are destroying ourselves. Is there any hope in the events of the book?

Literary Precedents

Philadelphia Fire has connections to other literature in sometimes surprising ways. Looming over the narrative is the image of Shakespeare, with whom Wideman has been compared. In this case the comparison is particularly apt because of the references in the novel to The Tempest. Wideman has the same ability to provide a panoramic view of life and to people his narrative with compelling characters.

In its strident look at racial relations, Philadelphia Fire has precedents in tracts by African Americans such as Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X. In the anger emanating from the novel and in its consideration of urban decay, an intriguing juxtaposition is Tunnel Vision (1994) by Sara Paretsky, whose angry heroine confronts homelessness, racism, and violence.

Wideman's unflinching look at the harsh realities of life echoes the naturalistic approaches of early American writers like Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. In Philadelphia Fire Wideman draws upon a literary tradition which seeks to change society by illuminating it.

Related Titles

To varying degrees, Wideman mixes fact and fiction in all of his books. His first three novels are closest to pure fiction. The Homewood Trilogy (1985) is based upon family stories. Brothers and Keepers (1984) is a factual account of Wideman's relationship with his brother Robby. But Philadelphia Fire freely mixes fact and fiction and calls attention to itself doing so. Of this trend Wideman has said, "My life is a closed book. My fiction is an open book. They may seem like the same book — but I know the difference".

In terms of subject matter, Brothers and Keepers is perhaps most closely related, dealing with violence and the social forces which create it. In terms of overall tone, the short story collection Fever (1989) proffers an equally dismal view of the world.

Wideman seems to be coming to an increasingly pessimistic stance in his writing. Philadelphia Fire offers little hope, scarce beauty, and growing insanity, violence, and despair.

Copyright Information

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