Picturing Will Short Guide

Picturing Will by Ann Beattie

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.

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".

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".

Contents

Characters

Major characters in Picturing Will include Will himself, Jody, Will's mother, Mel, Will's stepfather, Jody's friend Mary Vickers, an unhappily married yet kind woman whose husband drinks too much and sleeps with his socks on, her son Waggoner, Haverford, Mel's old friend, whose punny nickname "Haveabud" better describes him and is used in favor of the formal name throughout the book, Wayne, Will's natural father, Jody's first husband, who has had one wife prior to Jody, and Corky, Wayne's third wife. Will has two friends, his best friend Waggoner, Mary Vicker's child, and Spencer, Haveabud's ex-lover's ex-wife's child whom Haveabud molests.

Wayne's friends and Corky's friends, Wayne's bed partners, and Jody's employers, make up a cast of minor characters who also further the book's themes.

Bright, imaginative, and sensitive, Will is a fully realized character in himself, and also the character whose growth measures the other characters.

In many ways a typical five-year-old, Will likes GI Joe, plastic cowboys and Indians, cartoons, police sirens, running too fast on the playground, playing doctor by listening for the heartbeats of furniture legs with his toy stethoscope, and playing with his food.

He also refuses to eat raisins because he has been told that they are "monsters' nose goop." In ways very important to the book's central theme of child nurturing, and like other children, he is reticent about those problems that disturb him the most. Consequently, he does not tell Mel, who might have listened, about what Haveabud does to Spencer.

Jody, partly out of necessity, is physically and emotionally close to Will in his infancy, and a genuinely loving and responsive mother, but by the end of the book, she has allowed a damaging distance to widen between herself and her son. An early passage about her need for Will shows really how deeply she has been hurt by Wayne's departure, for she uses the child as a companion in her insomnia and as "a buffer against the world." Is her finding of another such buffer with the advancement of her career as a photographer the reason she withdraws from her child? We are told that she is glad that she shares her vulnerable moments with a child who will not remember that she has been vulnerable. It is not until the end of the book when we see how completely Mel has taken over her nurturing role, and we also sense her withdrawal from Mel, that we see her as someone who, once having been betrayed, has run away from her need for others all her life.

Her betrayer, Wayne, is, next to Haverford or Haveabud, the book's meanest villain. He has betrayed three wives in succession. He treats his male friend, Zeke, with contempt. He keeps his first marriage a secret from Jody well into their marriage, and he never tells his third wife Corky about it. He leads Corky to believe that Jody has tricked him into having a child, and even before he leaves Jody, he is a reluctant, unloving father. He urinates in swimming pools, using the rationalization that everyone does it. Yet

Wayne is not without his human, vulnerable, and somewhat redeeming side, for his inability to make commitments to women and children is traced to crippling fear of mortality and human vulnerability. He dwells on newspaper stories about children who have suddenly died from accidents, and while a young father, has a recurrent debilitating fantasy that Will has smothered in his car seat.

In sharp contrast to Wayne, Will's natural father, is Mel Anthis, Will's stepfather. He is the closest the novel has to a truly good character. The italicized comments, mostly about child rearing, that occur throughout the book turn out to be his, although this is not revealed until the final chapter. Even at the outset of the book, however, Mel's superiority as a parent is clear. Jody herself admits that it is Mel who loves Will "sensibly," and although we later learn from Mel that he has nurtured Will at first to win Jody, we also find out that Mel has progressed from that point into being perhaps the only true parent Will has.

D. B. Haverford is another character who figures in Mel's scheme to marry and keep Jody, for it is through Haverford, or Haveabud, that Jody gets her first show. Of course Mel does not know of his old friend's repressed homosexual yearnings, and there is a slight suggestion that Haveabud himself is not quite aware of his intentions for Spencer when he initially takes an interest in him. Yet Haveabud has apparently planned to bring the lipstick, which he uses to initiate the homosexual play, to his hotel room, and at that point he knowingly preys upon the boy. Haveabud is a character who first seems merely playfully amoral, but an increasingly sinister view of him develops as the book progresses.

The most revealing remark about him he makes himself when he asks during the planning stages of his approach to Spencer: "Why bother to understand your reasons when you are so strongly drawn to something or someone?" Failure to understand his motives (which appear to be his sorrow at losing Luther, alias Jake Markson, Spencer's father, as a lover) may be what make Haveabud a child-molesting pervert rather than a healthy man who has openly chosen a gay life. Although they are very different, Haverford has in common with Jody the refusal to acknowledge vulnerability.

Among the book's secondary characters, the most notable are Mary Vickers and Corky, who serve as foils for Jody.

Mary stays married to Waggoner Fisk Vickers not out of love but out of fear of losing others to whom she is intimately connected: her children and her friends. Her extreme reaction to killing the deer with her car may in part be explained by her having made vulnerable emotional ties the center of her life, and in some sense she herself represents the emotional vulnerability that Jody and Haveabud hide from. She is the last person who would do such a thing intentionally. Corky, who, like Mary, places a high value on nurturing, is distinguished from Jody by her single-minded desire to have a child.

She encourages Will's visit to Florida because she believes Wayne will have positive memories and want to have a baby with her. She is the only one to greet Will upon his

arrival and buys him a toy, a set of jacks, that Wayne notices only when he sees the wrappings in the garbage. She keeps a book, About Amniocentesis, by her bedside where Wayne can see it. Although Wayne acknowledges that Corky "has a good heart," he is planning to leave her and has already started his ill-fated affair with Kate. We are told that Corky later becomes a practical nurse.

While both Mary and Corky endear themselves to others, so that even some of the least admirable characters like them, they lack Jody's strength and creativity and do not find the kind of protector she finds in Mel, so that others take advantage of them. (Corky's own father has left her mother when Corky was ten years old.) The fates of the characters in the book suggest that while happiness is elusive, and innocent children often suffer, there are striving, caring characters who do make a difference, even helping those who do not acknowledge their importance.

Social Concerns/Themes

The central theme of Picturing Will is the nurturing of a child. The major adult and child characters are seen as they touch the life of the boy Will, whose future is threatened when his father abruptly deserts the family shortly after presenting his mother with a bouquet of flowers. Will's situation reflects the plight of many modern-day children who are compromised emotionally and financially by divorce. Yet Will's problems have only begun with the departure of his father, for the boy is later subjected to other disturbing encounters with "adult" life.

These include the sexual abuse of a slightly older friend, Spencer, by D. B. Haverford, aptly nicknamed Haveabud, Will's photographer mother's agent, who also is Mel's old school friend.

(Spencer, whose mother is on her third husband, is the son of a former male business partner and lover of Haverford's.) Throughout most of the story, and during this particular chilling scene, Will is about five years old, although we are given glimpses of his babyhood and a "snapshot" of his early adult life (age twenty-six).

While much of Will's life is happy, and he does grow into a responsible, hardworking, and seemingly happy adult, the book centers on a time in his life when his premature loss of innocence makes these possibilities appear uncertain. Furthermore, both his stepfather Mel (the best father and perhaps the best parent in the book) and his mother Jody, for varying reasons, are not always there in his moments of greatest need. Mel is asleep while Will watches Haveabud seduce Spencer.

Jody's career as a photographer, which pulls mother and child out of poverty, later becomes the reason for her withdrawal from Will when he attempts to tell her about Haveabud's pedophilia.

(One also wonders about her pushing for Will's vacation in Florida with his father Wayne, a worthless womanizer.)

Wayne cheats on his third wife Corky with Kate, a woman whose involvement with drug trafficking results in his forcible arrest by police as Will looks on from an upstairs window. The book is deeply pessimistic about a child's chances for reaching adulthood without suffering lasting emotional scars. Jody's photography is the book's chief symbol of creativity and art and its possible redemptive powers, though we later see that Mel's secret novel, a sort of diary he has kept of his experience of raising Will, also must figure in Beattie's view of the role of art in life.

Jody's closeup of her friend Mary Vickers after she has run over a deer is the prize-winning photo that launches her career. This circumstance is doubly ironic: The episode almost drives Mary crazy, and the death of deer on roads here and in Beattie's other fiction is a strong symbol of the inevitable destruction of the vulnerable within and outside of us, the loss of innocence.

Jody's usual subject early in her career is weddings, ironic not only because she herself has been deserted, but also because the wedding photos are an illusory fixing in time of happy moments which are likely in most cases to be transitory.

Thus both Jody's extraordinary success in her career and best of her photos themselves suggest the inability of human beings to see life clearly and control their destinies. Her pictures of Will himself are barely visible, and even Mel's searching diary/novel about Will is missing important secrets.

Furthermore, Jody's marriage to Mel, which in the happy part of a Victorian novel would grow and flourish, seems to be receding at the end: Mel has to fight to keep his favorite old blue chair since Jody is always redecorating, and Jody herself saves her energy for communicating with her guests from the art world rather than her husband. In the artist's own life, the value of art seems not to apply.

The life events treated in this book are those treated in Beattie's earlier fiction: unstable marriages, relationships based on narcissism, lust, and abuse, sexual and other abuse of children, drug abuse, and illicit drug trafficking. The perilousness of the search for love, the premature loss of childhood innocence, and the tenuousness of life itself in a world of accidents and surprises, as well as human mistakes, also are themes that have been dealt with effectively in Beattie's earlier fiction.

The difference that we see in Picturing Will is that some characters more clearly appear to be making a real effort to live purposeful, fulfilling lives, albeit all end up somewhat shy of the goal. Making a child the center of this book also orders the ethical predicaments of all the characters, giving it a unity that Beattie has been accused of lacking in her earlier fiction, and shocking the reader more forcefully than before with the terrible price paid by all, most poignantly children, when adults do not take control of their own lives.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Commonly acknowledged literary predecessors of Beattie are post-World War II writers such as J. D. Salinger, John Updike (as he wrote in the 1950s), and John Cheever. Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme are also predecessors in that they present views of modern life as fragmented and chaotic.

Beattie and these Postmodernist writers are identified as "minimalists," supposedly characterized by flat, deadpan prose and the refusal to provide solutions for the human predicaments they write about. Her early stories and novel, Distortions (1976) and Chilly Scenes of Winter (1976) drew the criticism that she wrote merely about her own "Woodstock" generation, but both Beattie and subsequent critics have commented on the unfairness of using her subject matter against her (as Beattie put it, no one criticized James Joyce for writing about Ireland). The term "minimalist" also needs qualification, especially in Beattie's case, for the problems of modern life that she raises are as serious as they are in any fiction.

Christina Murphy links Beattie to the realist writers of the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, and prefers the term "Neorealist" to "minimalist." Certainly Beattie's focus is on particular scenes from daily life and on how particular characters, usually ones who lack fixed beliefs, try to shape and order their lives. She has been criticized at times for failing to interest the reader in such scenes, but at her best, as I think she is in this novel, she weaves them into a satisfying whole.

In Picturing Will there are two basic structural techniques which give powerful coherence to the multifaceted view of characters and action that have characterized Beattie's previous fiction.

The first is the way the life of the child measures the degree of purpose and moral value, as well as the occasional powerlessness, of the adult characters.

The second is the implicit comparison between two modes of artistic expression that is elucidated only at the end of the book: that between photography and writing. While Jody has been photographing scenes of other people's weddings and life tragedies, a job which has kept her intact not just financially by psychically, Mel has concentrated on the family he has sought with such persistence. He records his efforts in the novel that Will reads at the end and which we recognize as the italicized passages which have appeared intermittently throughout, so that what appeared fragmentary is really a unity. This effort distinguishes Mel from the other nurturers in the book, Mary and Corky, as well as from those who refuse to analyze and connect the separate dimensions of their lives, Jody and Haveabud.

Nevertheless, while writing seems to have the advantage over photography as the connective principle of the novel and of seemingly chaotic life, the dramatic force of Jody's photographs is undeniable and allows for the expression of realities of the sort that elude Mel's pen; the stark photo of Mary Vickers in her car after killing the deer

depicts an episode analogous in its negative power to the scene where Haveabud seduces the seven-year-old boy, Spencer.

The delineation of the deeper motives of her characters in this book, and the complex way that they interrelate, although not in nineteenth-century drawing room conversations, prevent them from being just types, as one critic, Merle Rubin, has argued.

Key Questions

Whatever the changes in her material and methods over the years, Beattie remains famous a the voice of a disaffected generation, and consequently a central interest for discussion is that of how the characters cope with the often disjointed quality of their lives. Central also is the issue of how detachment in the author or narrator affects the reader — are we unmoved simply because the author is not vividly present in the work? Another key issue is that of moral and ethical vision, or lack of it in Beattie's work. That she chronicles the breakdown of the family, for instance, does not need to mean that she is advocating such fragmentation, but many critics complain about the lack of a controlling vision or even revelation.

1. Jody could serve as a role model for young mothers abandoned by their husbands. She starts a career and sees to it that her child is provided with both love and money. She then finds a nurturing stepfather for her son. At what point in the book do you see this ideal breaking down? What are Jody's faults as a mother, and is her career implicated in them in any way?

2. Rank the chief male characters in this book according to your vision of their moral worth. Is Beattie being unfair in her assessment of men in general?

3. Jody and Mel are both artists, she a photographer, and he a writer. Do their roles as artists contribute to, or impede or conflict with, their abilities to be good parents to Will?

4. Compare Wayne and Haveabud as amoral or immoral male characters. Do what extent does each appear to understand how he imperils children?

5. Jody, Mel, and Will are a nontraditional family in that Mel, the stepfather, plays the nurturing role for Will.

To what extent does this nontraditional family preserve the underlying values popularly associated with more traditional families? How well do you believe this family communicates?

6. Discuss the idea of photographs as a unifying metaphor in this novel. In what ways does the novel call attention to the advantages and disadvantages of photography over writing as a medium to reveal truths about life?

7. Apart from obvious autobiographical reasons, why do you think Beattie chose to make Will an only child? How does this choice relate to other aspects of the book, structural and thematic?

8. Beattie is famous for her use of detail, and as some critics put it, her concern with surfaces. Choose some appropriate passages and show whether the details work to reveal character or theme, or whether they merely clutter the narrative.

9. What common point does Beattie make about dinosaurs and penguins?

10. Why is the last section of this three part novel the shortest?

Related Titles

This book has been preceded by several novels and collections of short stories and is succeeded by the short story collection What Was Mine (1991).

It represents an important advance in Beattie's conception of how she can best unify novels.

She herself has called Chilly Scenes of Winter, her first novel, more like a play than a novel, and cites as an improvement her 1980 novel, Falling in Place (McCaffery and Gregory, interview in The Literary Review). In that book, Beattie first employed italicized passages as a unifying device, as she attests, so that she could include material that she has left out. The climax of this book occurs when the overweight son of a divorcing couple shoots his sister with a gun his cynical "best" friend has given him.

Although at times, both John Joel and his sister Mary elicit our sympathy, critics complain that the book is Cheever without the warmth and humanity.

It is perhaps more just to observe that there is warmth and humanity there, but it is not allowed to prevail in the book. All the themes and concerns of the later novel are here, especially the loss of childhood innocence and the neglect of children, but the boys and the sister are older, and the human setting is a stultified middle-aged marriage, not a fresh start from the ruins of an old one as is Jody's and Mel's in Picturing Will.

The 1985 novel Love Always is a funny satire on the media culture. Its central female character Lucy, who writes an advice column for the magazine Country Daze, is set to the task of caring for her fourteen-year-old niece, Nicole, who is the star of the soap opera Passionate Intensity. The falsification of lives by media hype is one of the central themes here, and the humorous disparity of viewpoints among the characters on a number of subjects creates a much lighter textured book than Picturing Will. Nevertheless, similar themes, especially loss of innocence and the disaffected, disconnected lives of the characters and their doomed pursuit of love, anticipate the more recent novel.

By the time of the publication of Picturing Will, Beattie had also produced significant collections of short stories, What Was Mine (1991) and Where You'll Find Me (1986), which include stories written since 1980.

Reviews of the latter collection confirm that she is moving toward a more fully realized fictional world and the depiction of a variety of characters who command their audience's attention for different reasons. "In the White House" is about a couple's consideration for one another's feelings after the loss of their daughter to leukemia. "Janus" is a highly praised story whose unifying metaphor is a bowl that comes to symbolize the split vision and duplicity of a woman real estate agent. (Some critics have faulted this one for being too patly unified and therefore atypical of Beattie's best work.) Other subjects of this collection include the poignantly vivid memory of a love affair

("Snow"), marital infidelity and fear of falling in love against the backdrop of a chaotic Christmas party where the "Messiah" is not playing and neglected children wait in the wings ("Where You'll Find Me"), and the price paid by a woman who gets married instead of developing her career as an artist ("Skeletons"). These are stories that leave a lasting, vivid impression because of the talent Beattie has developed over the years for rendering full bodied characters and fictional scenes with just a few quick strokes.

Beattie has also written a children's story, "Spectacles" (1985), a fantasy about a young girl who dons her great grandmother's eyeglasses and is able to understand her dreams and problems.

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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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