Prisoner's Dilemma Short Guide

Prisoner's Dilemma by Richard Powers

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Characters

The overwhelming character in the Prisoner's Dilemma is Eddie Hobson, the linchpin of the Hobson family, the everpatient, ever-teaching father modeled on Powers's own father. Eddie's black humor, his irrepressible punning, his preoccupation with games all contribute to the overall thematic structure of the novel.

Eddie's wife, Ailene, is quietly and practically subversive. She keeps the family running. She goes along with the denial that Eddie is seriously ill but still contrives to get him into the hospital, from which he bolts and disappears.

The children adore their father and are torn by their inherent knowledge of how ill he is. Artie, the elder son, is a law student. Eddie, Jr., is a teen-ager, who, when his father disappears, goes to Alamogordo in a futile attempt to find him. On the trip, however, he is the gawking, ever-curious tourist who takes in everything he can in the vicinity of the White Sands Proving Ground.

Lily Leeds is the elder daughter, living at home after a divorce. She is the only one who seems to reach outside the family for companionship. Essentially the Hobsons are a self-contained entity. The younger daughter, Rachel, seems not so fully realized as the other Hobson siblings.

Powers ascribes a distorted genealogy to Walt Disney for the purposes of the novel. He, as a builder of illusions, becomes Powers's symbol of what constitutes America, yet the cohesive Hobson family becomes another symbol of our national identity.

Bud Middleton represents shattered hopes. The youth of a nation are its future, yet Bud and thousands like him are sacrificed to the irrational machine of war. The leaders of a nation, patriots by most definitions, demand the sorts of illusion that they commission Disney to create for them. But underlying the illusion is a dead Bud Middleton and a dying Eddie Hobson, both victims of humankind's inability to settle differences rationally rather than by force.

Social Concerns

Prisoner's Dilemma is, on the surface at least, a book about family. The Hobson family is a closely-knit group consisting of the mother, father, and four children, two boys and two girls. They live in De Kalb, Illinois, where the father, Eddie Hobson, a former high school history teacher, is ill with terminal cancer, much as Powers's own father was a decade earlier. The family and Eddie do not discuss the disease, nor is Eddie ever referred to as being sick, although at times he is referred to as "not well."

At one point, Eddie is sufficiently unwell that Ailene, his wife, cons him into entering the hospital, but Eddie quickly and clandestinely engineers his own escape. He has a need to return to the place where his illness began in 1945: Alamogordo, New Mexico. He was stationed there during his wartime military service. He was there in mid-July, 1945, when an earth-shattering blast, reported in the Albuquerque Tribune as a munitions explosion, rocked the area. One month later, two atomic bombs were loosed upon Japan, thereby ending the war in the Pacific.

Eddie Hobson, no longer teaching history, has invented a town, Hobstown.

He records its history on a tape recorder.

He is in a rush against time and he knows it. But Powers implies throughout the book that we are all in a race against time, that we all have an unquenchable urge to produce, to record history, and that we are all pawns of time upon whom history moves relentlessly.

Against the backdrop of the Hobson family, Powers introduces other story lines in this multi-text novel. One involves Bud Middleton, first seen as a teen-ager at the New York World's Fair in 1939, then as a worker in a Walt Disney recreation of the whole United States to scale, then, indirectly, as a soldier slain by the Japanese in the Battle of Guadalcanal.

The Bud Middleton story is but one of several subplots in Prisoner's Dilemma, whose major subplot involves Walt Disney, improbably held in a Japanese internment camp for reasons that Powers invents to serve the purposes of the novel. Disney's release from the camp is arranged by high Washington officials who commission the creator of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck to create a scale model of the entire United States in a huge cornfield outside De Kalb, Illinois, ironically the birthplace of barbed wire.

Disney is able to bring with him many of the interned Japanese-Americans from his camp.

The social impact of these interlocking stories emerge as a powerful statement about how human beings treat each other, how wars occur, and how enormous the impact of war is upon broad segments of the population: Disney is interned briefly and then forced

in an almost mock heroic way to build a nation, albeit a nation in miniature; Bud Middleton is killed in combat; Eddie Hobson is dying from causes spawned by the war.

Yet in the face of this, Powers writes of a time capsule buried on the grounds of the New York World's Fair to be opened five thousand years hence, in the year 6939.

The looming question is whether the human race will last that long upon Earth.

Techniques

As in his other novels, Powers uses historical interchapters throughout Prisoner's Dilemma. In this novel, however, he focuses on family more prominently than he has in his other novels. Juxtaposed against family is an outside world, its detachment intensified by its contrast to the closeness—one might justifiably call it the insularity—of the Hobson family.

Within the family, Powers's narrative technique suggests, exists a warmth and cohesiveness that are at the heart of what makes civilizations possible. Outside that center, forces corrode all that family represents, constantly threatening it and, by extension, threatening civilization as a whole.

In Prisoner's Dilemma, Powers is particularly successful in dealing with the question of worlds within worlds. Bud Middleton, part of the model family at the New York World's Fair, dangles on a stalled parachute drop above the twelve hundred acres of Flushing Meadows that the Fair occupied. Below him is a small world with separate nations: the Polish pavilion, the Greek pavilion, the French pavilion, the pavilions of many of the developed nations of the world. This is a good apprenticeship for someone who will help Disney to create a scale model of the entire United States.

Themes

A major theme of Prisoner's Dilemma is that, in the face of possible extinction, humans have a continuing need to create and to record their history. The entire Walt Disney project, sponsored by the highest levels of government, is to create an historical artifact. Eddie Hobson with his tape recorder, ever the history teacher, races against time to do the same thing.

In Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance (1985; see separate entry), Powers explored the meaning in life, as he has in his subsequent novels. In this novel, he seems to suggest that although humankind is spinning out of control toward annihilation, it must leave its mark. The presupposition underlying this need seems to be that some form of intelligent life will eventually find the artifacts that a defunct civilization, that a no-longerexistent species, has left behind on its planet.

Key Questions

Because Prisoner's Dilemma is among the easiest Richard Powers novel to understand and interpret and because it is readily available in paperback, it is his most frequently taught novel in American literature classes at the undergraduate level, where fruitful group discussions of it regularly take place. This is not to say that students who read the novel have clear sailing; indeed, most of them find parts of it bewildering, but out of their bewilderment come the kinds of searching questions that lead to cogent discussions and to deeper understandings.

Particularly valuable to those who wish to discuss the book in group situations are Tom LeClair's article in The New Republic, which deals with the book as a systems novel, and Maureen Howard's review, "Facing the Footage" in The Nation.

\. What does the title mean? What is the prisoner's dilemma in the puzzle of the same name? What implications has it for Powers's narrative?

2. How does the name "Hobson" relate to the prisoner's dilemma? What other implications can you read into Powers's choice of that name for the family upon which he focuses?

3. How does Powers first introduce Bud Middleton to readers? Does this introduction foreshadow anything else in the novel?

4. What historical liberties does Powers take in the Disney portion of the novel?

Do you think he is justified in doing so?

5. Discuss Powers's use of puns in Prisoner's Dilemma. Do you find any artistic purpose in his use of puns?

6. Make a four-column list whose headings are the names of the four Hobson children. Under each name, write as many descriptive words as you can about each of these offspring. Which of them do you find most fully developed in the story?

Less fully developed?

7. Write a paragraph of 150-200 words in which you describe Eddie Hobson, Sr.

as completely as you can.

8. Do you find any meaning in Powers's noting that De Kalb, Illinois, in which the novel is set, is the town in which barbed wire was invented?

9. Do you find parallels between the set on which Disney and his helpers are working and Nazi concentration camps?

10. Do you find any comments, overt or covert, about racism in this novel?

Literary Precedents

In reading the Disney portions of Prisoner's Dilemma, one might think of Thomas More's Utopia (1516) or of any of a number of subsequent books that created ideal worlds remote from current realities.

Powers's novel is somewhat more anchored in reality than some of these Utopian works were.

It must be pointed out that E. L. Doctorow's World's Fair (1986; see separate entry) preceded the publication of Prisoner's Dilemma by two years. The theme of Doctorow's book is similar in some respects to some of Powers's themes in his novel, but a reading of both novels will convince one that the two books grew independently even though they focused on similar artifacts.

Related Titles

In the broadest terms, one might find thematic similarities to Prisoner's Dilemma, particularly the Disney segments, in a book like William Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954; see separate entry)). Each is concerned with fashioning a new society, yet each approaches the task in a different way.

The Doctorow book, World's Fair, is also loosely related to Prisoner's Dilemma, but only a small portion of Powers's novel deals with a topic to which Doctorow devotes his entire book. In certain general ways, the father in Prisoner's Dilemma is reminiscent of the father in James Agee's A Death in the Family (1967), in which strong undercurrents suggest a large part of the untold story. Powers's novel, however, is much more cerebral than any of the books to which it may have some kinship.

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