Private Lies Study Guide

Private Lies by Bobbie Ann Mason

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Contents

Introduction

"Private Lies," first published in the March 1983 issue of *The Atlantic* and a classic Bobbie Ann Mason story, is set in the western Kentucky of her youth□a landscape dotted with a growing number of fast food restaurants and big box stores. As Laura Fine notes, "The people of Mason's stories are predominately lower-middle class white heterosexuals who could live in any subdivision or farm in the country," and the characters of "Private Lies" are just those kind of people. Like Mason's other characters, Mickey, Tina, and Donna are in transition.

Appearing in Mason's collection of short stories, *Love Life* (1989), "Private Lies" introduces themes of loss, grief, and mourning by characters who seem divorced from their own inner feelings, as well as from each other. Furthermore, in "Private Lies," Mason explores the shaky ground of gender in contemporary culture.

"Private Lies" has not received the kind of critical attention lavished on Mason's other stories such as "Shiloh," "Big Bertha Stories," and "Love Life." Nevertheless, with its laconic, spare style, and in its attention to painful moments of the heart, "Private Lies" is a story worth studying, one that reveals the importance of past relationships to present lives.

Author Biography

Private Lies: Bobbie Ann Mason [graphic graphicname="TIF00023466" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Bobbie Ann Mason was born near Mayfield, Kentucky, in 1940 and grew up on a dairy farm her father owned in rural Kentucky. Her early experiences in the country provided many of the settings for her later fiction. Mason attended the University of Kentucky, graduating in 1962. She left Kentucky immediately and moved to New York, where she earned a living writing for a variety of fan magazines. After several years of this work, she completed a master's degree program at the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1966. She then earned a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in 1972, writing her dissertation on Vladimir Nabokov. Her early work was primarily academic and critical; however, she soon began writing and publishing short stories.

After submitting some twenty stories to *The New Yorker* magazine, Mason's short story "Offerings" was accepted in 1980. Mason published many short stories in prestigious magazines and journals over the next several years, and by 1982, her short story collection *Shiloh and Other Stories* was published, and her reputation as a master of the short story was established. Mason followed this book with several novels: *In Country* (1985); *Spence + Lila* (1988) and *Feather Crowns* (1993). In 1989, *In Country*, probably Mason's most famous book, was made into a major motion picture, directed by Norman Jewison and starring Bruce Willis.

Mason published a collection of her earlier short stories, *Midnight Magic*, in 1998, as well as *Clear Springs: A Memoir* in 1999. She returned to short fiction in her 2001 collection, *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail*. In 2003 she wrote a biography of Elvis Presley, published by Penguin as part of the publisher's short biography series. Over the years, Mason has won a wide variety of awards for her work including an Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award, Southern Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as many nominations for other awards.

Mason generally sets her fiction in the western Kentucky of her youth. Her characters are most often working-class people, caught in various kinds of personal and cultural transitions, their lives dangling between where they have been and where they are going. "Private Lies" shares these characteristics. The story appeared in *The Atlantic* magazine in March, 1983. The story also was part of the collection *Love Life*, published in 1989.

Mason's continued productivity as a writer, as well as the ongoing critical attention her work receives, has earned her a position as a major American writer.

Plot Summary

"Private Lies" is the story of Mickey Hargrove, his wife Tina, his ex-wife Donna, and the baby Mickey and Donna gave up for adoption eighteen years before the story opens. The story begins with Tina and Mickey talking about the baby; Mickey wants to find her, but Tina wants nothing to do with it.

Mickey is drinking scotch laced with cream, because he is developing an ulcer and believes that the cream will counteract the damaging effects of the alcohol. Tina, a nurse, thinks this is silly. Mickey is a real estate salesman, but he has been unable to sell a house for six weeks. Although the couple and their two children seem to be financially stable, there are a few hints that money is tight.

Mickey's desire to find his daughter puts pressure on the marriage, as does Tina's move to working the night shift at the hospital. Tina, in the past, has taken care of everything and made sure that their lives maintained "regularity." Now that she is no longer home in the evening, Mickey is responsible for keeping "the schedule rolling." This includes helping his son Ricky with his homework and supervising both children while they watch television. Tina's absences, however, also make it easier later in the story for Mickey to talk to Donna on the phone.

Mickey considers issues of privacy. He is uncomfortable with his job of selling houses because of the way people poke and prod into other people's houses. He compares this to Tina's poking and prodding into other people's bodies as a nurse. The one place where privacy is being maintained in the story is in the adoption records.

Mickey then reflects on his relationship with Donna, his high school sweetheart. When she got pregnant, her family sent her to Florida to stay with her aunt. She gave birth there and gave the baby up for adoption. Mickey and Donna married after she graduated from high school, but the marriage was unworkable and only lasted three years. Donna later married again, but her husband died about three years before "Private Lies" begins.

In the next scene, Mickey is at Donna's apartment. He has not seen her since her husband died, but he has called her on the phone to arrange the meeting. He wants to talk to her about going to find their daughter, whose birthday is the next day. When he watches Donna move around her apartment, he realizes that this is a much different woman than the girl he married and divorced. She is somehow "prettier and more assured," taller, and with a husky voice and sexy smile.

Later, back at home, Tina tells Mickey to sign a paper so that their son Ricky can have speech therapy for a lisp Mickey does not believe Ricky has. As Mickey signs the paper, he recalls that, eighteen years ago, "he had signed a kid away completely."

Time passes. Mickey shows a house to a young couple, and while there, decides to visit Donna again. Donna tells him about her life since her husband has died, and her plans. They end up in each other's arms and begin an affair.

Mickey regularly visits Donna at her apartment on afternoons when he can get away from his office. When he finally sells a house, he decides he will take Donna to Florida. He tells Tina that he's going to Florida to find his daughter. Although Tina supposedly has no inkling about his affair, as Mickey prepares to leave, she bursts into tears. She seems to know that he is leaving her.

Donna and Mickey fly to Florida and stay in a beachfront hotel. The scene is very different from when they visited Florida on their honeymoon and nothing worked out right. This time, it is all perfect. When Mickey brings up the search for their daughter, however, Donna breaks down. She cries and tells Mickey about why she made the decision to give up the baby rather than have an abortion. She finally tells Mickey that she does not want to "dig up the past." Their daughter, she tells him, has "got her own life."

Mickey responds that perhaps their daughter wants to find them. The two walk on the beach, looking at the ocean. The story ends with Mickey imagining them years in the future, still on this beach, "crunching the fragments of skeletons."

Characters

Mickey Hargrove

Mickey Hargrove is the third person narrator of "Private Lies." He is probably about forty years old, a self-described "grouchy, preulcerous, balding bore." A real estate salesman in bad economic times, Mickey is married to Tina, a nurse, with whom he has two children. As a teenager, Mickey got his girlfriend Donna pregnant. She gave up the baby for adoption. Although they later married, their marriage only lasted three years, as it was tainted by the memory of the lost baby. Now, eighteen years later, Mickey is obsessed with finding his daughter.

Mickey lacks confidence in his career; he is uncomfortable appraising houses and looking into private spaces. He also is uncertain about his life and wonders how his lost daughter would view him. "If she could appraise his life, as he would a house," Mason writes, "she might find its dimensions too narrow, its ceilings too high, its basement cluttered and dank with memories and secrets."

Further, Mickey seems disconnected from his family. He says that being married to Tina is "like riding a bus. She was the driver and he was a passenger." Since Tina makes all the decisions, Mickey seems superfluous. Yet he is grateful to Tina; he believes if he had not met her, he might be a lonely bachelor living out of a rented room. In addition, Mickey seems to have little relationship to his children; they seem more Tina's children than his. This is particularly ironic, given Mickey's current need to find the child Donna gave up.

Eventually, his search for his daughter leads him back to Donna, with whom he has an affair. Mickey discovers that Donna is like a new woman to him, and, like the Coke and lemon icebox cake Donna gives him, she is a "forbidden" substance. This, however, makes her more desirable to him.

When Mickey takes Donna to Florida to search for their child, even Mickey himself does not seem to know what he is doing. Is he leaving Tina? Starting a new life with his first wife? Since not even Mickey seems to know, it is almost impossible for the reader to determine Mickey's future.

Tina Hargrove

Tina Hargrove is Mickey's current wife. She works as a nurse, and as the story opens, she has been put on night shift, so her schedule is out of kilter. Tina is a self-possessed, confident woman who makes all of the decisions in the house. Mickey believes that Tina has rescued him. Tina's favorite television show is *M.A.S.H*, and she likes to watch and criticize the surgical techniques of the doctors. Above all, Tina is orderly, organized, and regular. She deals with life by putting it on a schedule. As Mickey reveals to Donna,

"Tina was the sort of person who had separate garbage bags for everything, even tiny ones for scraps from each meal."

In addition, Tina seems to have a hard time connecting with her feelings, compartmentalizing the parts of her life as surely as she does the garbage. Although she suspects that Mickey is leaving her as he prepares for his trip to Florida, she talks about her niece and about a surgery for breast cancer. She finally cries, "You can't just up and leave all you've worked so hard for." The statement is telling: Mickey is not the one who has worked hard for all this, Tina has. She fails to recognize Mickey's growing alienation from her and from their children as he obsesses over the child he does not have. Her refusal to talk to Mickey about the lost child, and her unwillingness to be a part of the search may, in the final analysis, have cost Tina her marriage.

Donna Jackson

Donna is Mickey Hargrove's first wife. While they are in high school, she becomes pregnant with their child, whom she gives up for adoption. Her parents have some wealth and force her to go to Florida for her pregnancy and the adoption. Although Donna marries Mickey after the adoption, they are not happy together and eventually divorce. She subsequently marries Bill Jackson, who dies about three years before the story opens.

As a young woman, Donna was a whiner, according to Mickey, and she had problems with their poverty. As an older woman, however, Donna seems to have matured; she works, she travels, she has a life of her own. She has had bridgework, which makes her smile seem sexy to Mickey. Most of all, Donna has put into her past the child she gave away.

Not surprisingly, Donna works as a cosmetologist. Her job is to make women look more beautiful than they are, to cover up the imperfections in their appearances. Donna, likewise, tries to cover up her own grief and mourning for the lost child, and for her failed marriage to Mickey. Her clothing and her bravado all suggest that something more is going on with this character. When they finally reach Florida, Donna breaks down and shares with Mickey her feelings about giving up the baby.

Themes

Gender Roles

In many of her short stories, Mason examines the way that men and women relate to each other in a time when gender roles are undergoing transition. As Kenneth Millard writes, "Since the successes of feminism in the 1970s, women have begun to exercise more control over their lives and move towards greater autonomy and independence as they strive for forms of personal fulfilment less dictated to them by old social pressures." In "Shiloh" for example, the story opens with the wife, Norma Jean, lifting weights to build her biceps, while her husband Leroy, an injured trucker, is learning needlepoint and crafts. "Private Lies" also explores the changing landscape of gender roles and the need for women to express themselves in new ways.

Donna, Mickey's first wife, is a good example of the change occurring for women during the time since her pregnancy with Mickey's child. As a high school student, she had no choice but to leave school as her parents required. Indeed, her parents sent her to Florida so that they could avoid the social stigma of Donna's pregnancy. Now, as a recent widow, Donna chooses to travel, and she considers starting her own business. There is no man in her life who is telling her what to do. This new strength and energy makes her particularly attractive to Mickey.

Likewise, Mickey's wife, Tina, is a nurse, working outside the home to support the family while Mickey's real estate sales are down. She makes all the decisions in the house, something that Mickey seems to have valued at one time, but now feels constrained by.

In Mickey, Mason has created a sympathetic male character, albeit one who seems afloat in the changing world. Millard confirms this, noting that "Mason . . . offer[s] a generous analysis of the predicament of men, one which shows how they might learn to free themselves from outmoded roles to their decisive benefit and to the benefit of women too." Mickey's belated sense of responsibility for his first child, while too little too late, at least suggests the possibility of his maturing into a loving father and husband. Nevertheless, his choice to desert Tina and his children speaks also of escapist fantasies. What he will choose ultimately is not clear; Mason, however, allows him room to grow.

Marriage and Divorce

Many of Mason's stories have characters that are in shaky marriages, or are already divorced. "Private Lies" uses marriage and divorce as one of its primary themes in that it demonstrates how even marriage does not necessarily imply relationship. For example, Mickey and Donna marry just out of high school after their earlier pregnancy and the subsequent adoption of their baby. Donna's parents sent her away for the birth and the adoption, and Mickey only briefly saw her and the baby at the time of the birth. Although

this was an intimate detail of their lives together, it was not something they shared. When Mickey goes to see Donna at her apartment years later after the death of her second husband, Mickey realizes that the woman in front of him is nearly a stranger. He somehow thinks that she has changed dramatically over the years. However, he fails to understand that he never knew Donna in the first place.

Likewise, although Mickey credits his current wife Tina with having rescued him from self-destructive bachelorhood after his divorce, Mickey's descriptions of Tina are all superficial. She is like a "bus driver," she likes to watch "M.A.S.H.," she makes sure their bills are paid. In the story, there are very few hints that any of the characters feels anything like love for another, although the hints that are there are poignant. This is particularly true because the characters seem unable to do anything about their love for each other. Their inability to really know or understand each other impedes their ability to have happy marriages or relationships. These are characters who seem to walk through life alone, always wanting relationship, but not knowing how to manage it.

As a side note, Mason's title contains an oblique reference to another literary work that has marriage and divorce as its subject. In 1930, English writer Sir Noel Coward wrote a play called *Private Lives*. In the play a divorced couple arrive, with their new spouses, at the same vacation spot. The previously married couple begin an affair in spite of their current spouses' presence. Both the closeness of the titles and the similarity of subject suggest that Mason had her tongue in cheek when she named her short story: the characters of Coward's play (as in all his plays) are witty, urbane, sophisticated, and rich. Their escapades with marriage and divorce are the source of comedy. Mason's characters, on the other hand, are clumsy, rural, unsophisticated, and barely holding on financially. Their troubles, however, are not comedic in any way. Rather, they are the bittersweet problems of life in contemporary America.

Style

According to William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature*, realism is "fidelity to actuality in its representation." By this they mean that realistic literature calls for the writer to accurately and truthfully depict real life in their writing. Harmon and Holman continue, "Generally, too, realists are believers in democracy, and the materials they elect to describe are the common, the average, the everyday." Realists are interested in everyday details as opposed to large issues; further, they understand that any fiction truthfully reflecting life will be without linearity or even, at times, without plot.

Any student wishing to understand Mason's work needs this basic understanding of realism. Mason has been famously labeled as a "K-mart" or "dirty" realist, and these terms crop up in most critical discussions of the writer. Certainly, "Private Lies" offers evidence in its construction for why Mason has been so described.

In the first place, Tina, Mickey, and Donna are middle class people. Of them, Tina has the most education, since she works as a nurse; however, her values are solidly middle class. Mason describes the smallest details of their everyday lives, from Mickey's penchant for scotch and milk and Donna's work as a cosmetologist.

Mason chooses to include details in the story from popular culture as well. Tina's favorite television show is *M.A.S.H*. Mason not only tells the reader this, she also includes details from the show itself. "'B.J. shouldn't ask for a retractor at that point,'" Tina tells Mickey. The characters of "Private Lies" drink Coke and eat lemon ice box cake, their children go to Enrichment classes, and they relax in La-Z-Boy chairs. Their houses have Formica countertops, they eat out at McDonalds, and a luxurious apartment might look like a Holiday Inn.

Details such as these firmly place "Private Lies" in a specific time and place. Nevertheless, it is details such as these that cause some critics to denigrate Mason's fiction, suggesting that it is all surface detail without depth. Most critics, however, see Mason's surface detail as a way of suggesting the inner lives of her characters without judging them, without delving into the "private lies" each character (and each real person) carries with him or her.

Historical Context

Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States in 1980, defeating incumbent Jimmy Carter, just three years before the story "Private Lies" appeared in *The Atlantic*. Carter's presidency was marred by the taking of hostages in Iran, an event that led to an oil embargo and caused shortages in gasoline as well as skyrocketing gas prices.

During the early years of the Reagan administration, the country suffered from inflation, that is, rapidly rising prices, and stagnation in the growth of new jobs. Journalists quickly dubbed this situation "stagflation." It was a new phenomenon in American history, and the combination of little work and rising prices was particularly difficult for the lower middle classes who came to be called the "working poor." Like Tina and Mickey Hargrove, these people struggled to make ends meet, often while one of the couple is out of work.

Reagan's response to the economic woes was to cut taxes and government spending. This is often called "supply-side" economics, or "trickle down" economics. By giving corporations and wealthy people tax cuts, the reasoning goes, there will be more money available to stimulate economic growth.

Reagan's policies, especially during the first years of his administration, did not seem to materially affect the lower middle classes. Even with tax cuts, prices continued to soar, and jobs evaporated. Simultaneously, interest rates on home mortgages reached historic highs; it was not unusual to see mortgage rates of 14 percent in this time. These rates effectively put the cost of home ownership out of reach of many Americans. In addition, the high rates also depressed the construction industry as new home sales plummeted. Again, because many members of the lower middle class were employed as construction workers, the drop in new home sales put many out of work.

Although Reagan promised to cut government spending, by 1984, the federal deficit had exploded to $200 billion dollars due to decreasing revenues and increased spending. Tax cuts continued to be popular among voters, however, and Reagan was returned to office on his pledge not to raise taxes. By the time Reagan left office, the national debt, at $834 billion when he took office, had risen to $2.3 trillion, and the deficit was still a hefty $160 billion.

Also during Reagan's tenure as president, his administration deregulated the banking industry, particularly in the areas of savings and loans. This deregulation helped both bankers and investors by allowing risky ventures; however, when housing values went down, there were many defaults on loans. Because the loans had been sheltered by government insurance, the defaults put even more pressure on the federal budget. When a savings and loan went bankrupt, the federal government bailed it out. These losses had to be covered through tax revenues. This policy, then, had the lower middle classes paying through their tax dollars for the failed investments of the higher income members of the country.

Overall, the early 1980s were materially difficult in many ways for the members of the working classes. In addition, the changing fabric of American culture put stress on families and couples across the nation.

Critical Overview

"Private Lies" first appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1983 and was collected in *Love Life* in 1989. The publication of the collection generated a good deal of critical commentary, garnering strong reviews from both Lorrie Moore in *The New York Times Book Review* on March 12, 1989, and from Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times* on March 3, 1989. Moore comments that Mason's real strength as a writer is demonstrated in her short story collections, while Kakutani notes that Mason's stories are "finely crafted tales." Nevertheless, few reviewers mention "Private Lies" specifically.

Likewise, although Mason's work in general is the subject of ongoing critical attention, "Private Lies" seems overshadowed by some of Mason's other work, such as "Shiloh," "Residents and Transients," and *In Country*.

Nevertheless, there is much critical commentary useful in a reading of "Private Lies." Robert Brinkmeyer, for example, writes that

Mason's stories are filled with broken relationships□between people and their friends, husbands and wives, parents and children, people and their extended families□that together embody the collapse of family and community. . . . Rather than standing apart from the cultural chaos . . . Mason's families are as much a part of the cultural confusion as the strips of franchise restaurants and K-Marts where they eat and shop.

Certainly, in "Private Lies," readers are witness to a breakdown of two marriages.

Other critics have chosen to concentrate on Mason's inclusion in a group of writers known as "minimalists." Kathryn B. McKee, for example, writes in *The Southern Literary Journal*, "Known for spare prose and 'Kmart realism,' Bobbie Ann Mason's fiction typically offers minimalist portraits of life in a twentieth-century South, increasingly carpeted by fast food restaurants and discount chains." Although Mason herself often questions the label of "minimalist," most critics agree that her spare, lean prose and her attention to the prosaic details of the modern landscape are characteristic of her writing.

Mason herself comments on the differences she sees in the stories from her earlier collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *Love Life* in an interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver. "I think the characters' worlds changed a good bit between the two. I think life was changing so fast that they got more sophisticated, they've gotten more mobile, and I'd like to think that the stories have gotten more complex. I think my characters' lives were a lot simpler in the first collection."

In the same interview, Mason comments on her use of present as opposed to past tense. Unlike many of her earlier stories "Private Lies" is told in past tense. Mason says the stories,

in the back of *Love Life* are more recent, and they're in past tense. This signaled a change for me. . . . I think mainly it has to do with the author's authority. . . . If the author

starts in the past tense, if he says, "Once upon a time," then you assume he has sorted events out, he has a perspective on them, has judged them in some sense."

This reflection demonstrates a deliberate choice on Mason's part, a way of melding past, present, and future in "Private Lies."

Given the continued critical interest in Mason's work, it is likely that in the future there will be additional articles and commentary on both *Love Life* and "Private Lies." The collection, and the story, offer a showcase of what may be seen as a transitional period between her earlier, leaner stories, and her later, fuller ones.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of literature at Adrian College who writes on literary topics for a variety of publications. In this essay, Henningfeld considers how the unresolved grief and mourning over events in the past impinge on the characters' present conditions and render their futures ambiguous.

For the characters in Bobbie Ann Mason's short stories and novels, the past is a troubled landscape, one that they strive to keep hidden from their present lives in every way possible. Yet the past always manages to bubble up in some way, and the grief and mourning they refuse to acknowledge in the past have very real consequences in the present.

In her book *Understanding Bobbie Ann Mason*, critic Joanna Price alludes to this: "In several of the stories, Mason explores the effect of the past on the present, as her characters attempt to reconcile them through the process of mourning, whereby a grieving for cultural losses is incorporated into personal mourning." Certainly for Samantha Hughes, the main character of Mason's 1985 novel *In Country*, private grief for the father she has never known ultimately manifests itself in a trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a place of public mourning and reconciliation. Her mourning for her father moves the reader toward the closure of the "cultural losses" of the Vietnam War.

Price points out, however, that Mason's short "stories express little movement toward closure of the process of mourning, although there are occasional glimpses of the possibility of personal or cultural 'healing.'" Mason defers closure for her short story characters with several artistic moves. In the first place, she generally uses present tense, particularly in her early stories. The present tense emphasizes the characters' denial of their pasts, and offers no glimpse into the future.

In addition, Mason deliberately refuses to give her short stories any kind of narrative closure. Price writes that the "lack of closure is emphasized by Mason's use of the short story form: the open endings reveal little sense of how to move from the present into the future."

"Shiloh," perhaps Mason's most famous and most anthologized short story, demonstrates both of these techniques, as well as attention to grief and mourning. The story of Leroy and Norma Jean Moffitt is told exclusively in the present tense, and Leroy only dares mention the baby they lost in oblique comments, or in his reports of conversations he overhears between Norma Jean and her mother. The ending of the story is nothing if not inconclusive: Norma Jean stands on a river bluff some distance away from Leroy, flapping her arms. Neither Leroy nor the reader knows what this gesture signifies. Because this scene takes place on the Shiloh battlefield, the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, the reader also knows, however, that whatever the gesture means, there is great loss behind it.

In "Private Lies" Mason returns to the themes of past and present, grief and mourning that she opens in *In Country* and "Shiloh." In *In Country*, readers find a nearly eighteen-year-old woman searching for her dead father, a Vietnam War veteran who died before she was born. In "Private Lies," the seeker is the father, looking for a daughter he gave up for adoption nearly eighteen years earlier. Like Mickey, Samantha Hughes has kept her grief hidden away; yet once she begins to unravel her father's life, she reveals herself to be a very good researcher. She reads history texts, uncovers her father's journal, interviews other Vietnam veterans, and finally takes a camping trip alone to try and recreate her father's experience in Vietnam. By the end of the story, she has discovered her father's story, and has also located him on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

Mickey, however, has had less success transitioning his past into his present. Until shortly before the story opens, he has kept his past grief in the past very deliberately, largely through projection and passivity. He and Donna divorce, just three years after their marriage, as a result of their inability to work through the mourning process. Now, some fifteen years later, he reflects on why the marriage did not work: "Mickey often got drunk and left Donna alone at night. He blamed her for giving up the baby. After a while, he blamed her parents. In a later period, he blamed society. And more recently, he blamed himself." This movement from external to internal blame, however, differentiates Mickey from other male protagonists in Mason's short stories. No longer projecting the blame for his loss on others, Mickey has begun, however haltingly, to take responsibility for his own shortcomings. In addition, Mason's choice to use the past tense in this story allows Mickey to indulge in some self-reflection, something not available to Leroy Moffitt in "Shiloh." While this creative choice does not solve Mickey's problems for him, there is at least a sense that he might work his way through some of his issues. As Mason tells the reader, "If Mickey hadn't had a daughter born out of wedlock eighteen years ago next Tuesday, he'd have nothing on his mind now worse than the recession."

Mickey also strives to hide his grief and mourning through his passivity. He describes his current marriage to Tina as "like riding a bus. She was the driver and he was a passenger. . . . Tina rescued him. With her, life had a regularity that was almost dogmatic." The rigid attention to schedule and responsibility imposed by Tina offers Mickey an escape from his own shortcomings as a father. Nevertheless, his dissociation from his children, Ricky and Kelly, suggests that the early loss of his first child impedes his ability to participate in any way other than materially to the wellbeing of his children from his second marriage. Ironically, the daughter he does not have stands in the way of the children he has now.

Mickey also demonstrates his discomfort with the way the secrets of the past reveal themselves in his discomfort with his career: "Mickey was uncomfortable whenever he appraised houses. The owners hovered over him while he measured the rooms and ran through his checklist of FHA-approved specifications." Such musings turn inward as he thinks of his lost daughter and what she might think of him: "If she could appraise his life, as he would a house, she might find its dimensions too narrow, its ceilings too high, its basement cluttered and dank with memories and secrets. A dangerous basement."

For Mickey, returning to the past to find his daughter means going down the basement stairs.

Mickey's grief and loss also bubble into the present in a very physical form: in bubbles of pre-ulcerous stomach acid that give him almost constant pain. Although he hides his pain from his conscious mind, Mason seems to suggest, he feels in his gut the pain and sorrow of his youthful decision some eighteen years earlier.

And, although Mickey seems to be rousing himself to some level of action through his contact with Donna, he is unable to figure out how to translate that need for action into efficacious results. He is certainly not as skilled a researcher as Samantha Hughes. He does not make inquiries of the adoption agency, nor does he advertise in any papers. Unlike Samantha, who goes to her father's family for answers, he does not contact Donna's family. Without Tina's help in organizing himself, he seems utterly unable to think of what he might do to find his daughter. Instead, he continues to drink alcohol, laced with half-and-half as a grudging concession to his ulcer. In many ways, this ridiculous nod to the pain in his gut mirrors the ridiculousness of his own strategy for finding his daughter: go to Florida with Donna, and maybe he will run into her there.

Clearly, this is not a wise nor sensible strategy, no more so than drinking scotch and milk. What he seems to want is not to reconcile the past, but to recreate it. By initiating an affair with Donna, and by taking her back to Florida□both the site of the adoption and of their disastrous honeymoon□it is almost as if Mickey believes that he can start over again with the woman he once loved, by finding the child they first made and then gave away. He tries to creatively recreate the life he wishes he had had. For Mickey, there is "a sense of relief" in looking out over the ocean. For a moment, he is able to see into the future: "Mickey saw himself and Donna years from now, holding hands, still walking on this beach. They stepped back, then forward, like dancers." In this beautiful image, Mickey somehow seems able to account for past, present and future.

And yet, Mason does not close the story unambiguously. Mickey and Donna are walking on a coral beach, the sand comprised of the thousands of houses of tiny, ancient, dead marine animals. In the last line she writes, "They were moving like this along the beach, crunching the fragments of skeletons." This sentence serves to remind readers at what cost Mickey and Donna have come to terms with their grief. While they may have opened and cauterized the wound left by their early loss, they have, at the same time, created more loss. In leaving Tina and his children, Mickey creates a troubled future for himself: in this desertion he leaves not one child, but two, as well as a wife who loves him. Thus, any future happiness with Donna depends on further "private lies." At the same time, the image of the coral beach also suggests that ultimately, private lies or no, all ends in death and loss. Since this is the case, Mason seems to suggest, and since there is no changing the past, nor the future, present love offers the only hope in the face of despair.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "Private Lies," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

In 1989, Mason's novel *In Country* was made into a major motion picture, directed by Norman Jewison and starring Bruce Willis.

Topics for Further Study

Read about the economy of the United States between the years 1975 and 1985. What happened during this period? How does this economic picture affect the characters of "Private Lies" as well as the characters of Mason's other short stories?

Research teen pregnancy and adoption policies in the twentieth century. How have policies changed since the setting of "Private Lies?" How might the story be different if Mickey and Donna were in high school during the 1990s rather than in the 1960s?

Read several of Mason's short stories from the collections *Shiloh and Other Stories* and *Love Life*. Make a list of popular culture references in the stories such as brand names, movies, television shows, or pop music, etc. Are there any patterns in the references Mason chooses to make? How do these pop culture references contribute to or detract from the stories?

Read *In Country*, Mason's novel set in the post—Vietnam War era. Compare and contrast this novel with the story "Private Lies." Imagine the life of Mickey and Donna's baby, using Sam Hughes as your model. Write a short story in the style of Bobbie Ann Mason using Mickey and Donna's daughter as the main character.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Unemployment reaches 10.8 percent in 1982, and high inflation rates seriously depress the house market. New home sales and sales of existing homes are down dramatically.

Today: The post—September 11, 2001 economic downturn results in rising unemployment rates, although not to the level of the 1980s. Low inflation, however, keeps mortgage rates historically low, resulting in a strong housing market.

1980s: Pregnant young women are permitted to remain in public school by the 1980s, a marked change from the 1960s and early 1970s when girls were often sent away during the time of their pregnancies.

Today: Public school districts permit pregnant young women in classes and also often provide special classes or schools, sometimes with daycare, to assist these young women with their education.

1980s: With the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision permitting legal abortion, abortion rates rise through the 1980s.

Today: Abortion rates drop through the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reasons for this are contested but may include increased access to birth control, abstinence, decreased access to abortion, use of a morning-after pill, and increased use of ultrasounds.

1980s: Although pregnancies in teenagers have dropped slowly since the 1950s, there is a steep upward climb in the 1980s.

Today: Teenage pregnancies reach a United States record low in 2000, although the rate is still higher in the United States than in other developed countries.

1980s: The United States divorce rate reaches 5.3 divorces for every 1000 people, a historic high.

Today: The divorce rate is slightly lower than in the 1980s, largely due to the dropping marriage rate.

What Do I Read Next?

A Spring-Fed Pond: My Friendships with Five Kentucky Writers over the Years (2001), by James Baker Hall, is a collection of photographs of Mason and four other Kentucky writers.

Bobbie Ann Mason's *Elvis Presley* (2003) is a short biography of the famous singer and is a good example of Mason's nonfiction.

Minimalism and the Short Story Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison (1999), by Cynthia Whitney Hallett, offers an overview of literary minimalism, looking at some of the stories of the movement's most characteristic writers.

In Country (1985) is Mason's novel of a young Kentucky woman looking for information about her father, who died in the Vietnam War before she was born. This is an excellent coming of age story from a female perspective.

Further Study

Gholson, Craig, "Bobbie Ann Mason," in *Bomb*, Vol. 28, Summer 1989, pp. 40—43.

In this interview, Mason covers issues such as class and the importance of television in the lives of her characters.

Peach, Linden, "'K-Marts and Lost Parents': 'Dirty Realism' in Contemporary American and Irish Fiction," in *Critical Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1997, pp. 61—79.

Peach discusses both the definition of "dirty realism" and its use in the writing of Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Tobias Wolff, among others.

Ryan, Maureen, "Stopping Places: Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Stories," in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, edited by Loren Logdsden and Charles W. Mayer, Western Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. 133—41.

In her examination of Mason's early short stories, Ryan focuses on issues of change as characters attempt to adjust to a changing rural landscape.

Wilhelm, Albert, *Bobbie Ann Mason: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Twayne's Studies in Short Fiction, Twayne Publishers, 1998.

Wilhelm's book examines Mason's short stories, including several interviews, additional criticism, and a bibliography.

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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:

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