Proper Library Study Guide

Proper Library by Carolyn Ferrell

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□Proper Library□ by Carolyn Ferrell was first published in the literary journal *Ploughshares* in 1993. It was selected for the collection *Best American Short Stories 1994* by editor Tobias Wolff, which brought Ferrell's work to the attention of Houghton Mifflin editor Janet Silver, who offered her a book contract. In 1997, the book *Don't Erase Me* was released, a collection of eight first-person stories featuring mostly poor black girls and women. □Proper Library,□ however, tells the story of a young black boy, a gay teenager living in the housing projects of the South Bronx in New York. Ferrell's experiences directing a family literacy project in the South Bronx helped her to render a disturbingly accurate and poignant portrait of the challenges faced by Lorrie and his family and the attitudes and prejudices that govern their lives. Despite the difficulties Lorrie faces, however, the story is not entirely bleak; his own confidence, compassion, and optimism leave the reader feeling that he may someday succeed in fulfilling his dreams.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1962

Carolyn Ferrell was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 29, 1962, and was raised on Long Island. She began writing at the age of six, beginning with poetry she describes as □often terrible,□ then moving on to stories.

In 1980, Ferrell began her studies in creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. During her four years at Sarah Lawrence, she studied with such accomplished authors as Grace Paley and Allan Gurganus. After graduating in 1984, she lived in Germany for four years, studying German literature and also working as a high school teaching assistant on a Fulbright scholarship. Ferrell is a skilled violinist, and during her years in Germany she was a member of both the Berlin Sibelius Orchestra and the Brandenburgisches Kammerorchester.

After her years in Germany, Ferrell returned to New York, teaching adult literacy first in Manhattan then in the South Bronx (where □Proper Library□ takes place). She also directed a family literacy project in the South Bronx.

Ferrell then began studying for her master's degree in creative writing at City College of New York. It was during this time that she began submitting her stories to literary journals. Soon her stories were published in *Callaloo*, *Literary Review*, and *Fiction*. The story □Proper Library□ was published in the journal *Ploughshares* in 1993 and was selected for *The Best American Short Stories 1994*. Two years later, in 1996, Ferrell returned to Sarah Lawrence College as a teacher of creative writing.

The following year (1997) was an eventful one. Ferrell got married to Linwood Lewis, a psychologist also teaching at Sarah Lawrence, and the couple had their first child, Benjamin. This was also the year that her first book, a collection of short stories entitled *Don't Erase Me*, was released. It was an impressive debut; the book won the Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction from the *Los Angeles Times* and the Zacharis First Book Prize from *Ploughshares*. Stories from the collection have been anthologized in *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers*, *Children of the Night: Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present*, and *Streetlights: Illuminating Tales of the Urban Black Experience*. *Streetlights* was edited by Doris Jean Austin, whom Ferrell credits as being a mentor and major influence on her writing.

As of 2005 Ferrell continued to teach creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and was working on a novel to be published by Houghton-Mifflin. She lives with her husband Linwood Lewis and their two children (daughter Karina was born in 2002) in New York.

Plot Summary

□Proper Library□ tells the story of one day in the life of Lorrie Adams, a fourteen-year-old gay black boy living in the housing projects of the South Bronx. Lorrie lives with his mother, his morose Aunt Estine, and a wide assortment of sisters, cousins, nieces, and nephews. Lorrie loves to take care of □the kids,□ braiding their hair, ironing their clothes, and teaching them math and vocabulary words. There are nine little kids in all, but Lorrie points out, □when my other aunt, Samantha, comes over I got three more.□

Lorrie's day begins with his mother's reminder that when he returns home from school, they will □practice the words.□ Lorrie learns new vocabulary words each week with his mother, who sees his potential and wants him to pass his City-Wide tests. Despite his obvious intelligence, Lorrie repeatedly fails the tests and is held back. His acerbic cousin Cee Cee has the answer: □If you wasn't so stupid you would realize the fact of them holding you back till you is normal.□

After a warning from his mother, □Don't let them boys bother you now,□ Lorrie heads to school. He is met at the front door by Tommy, the husband of his sister Lula Jean, who □has a lady tucked under his arm and it ain't Lula Jean.□ Another sister, Anita, slips him a letter knife and, in a reference to Lorrie's former lover Rakeem, says, □If that boy puts his thing on you, cut it off. I love you, baby.□

On his way to the bus stop, Lorrie is approached by Layla Jackson with her baby whom she calls Tee Tee. She begs Lorrie to take the baby, because her mother will not and Layla needs a sitter. Lorrie tells her he cannot take Tee Tee now, but if she brings him by the school later he will take the baby home with him. Layla agrees, and before she leaves she tells Lorrie that her cousin Rakeem wants to see him.

At this point, Lorrie tells the story of his six-month affair with Rakeem. He met Rakeem under the Bruckner Expressway, where one day they had sex. Rakeem told him, □This is where your real world begins, man.□ Lorrie stopped going to school and instead met Rakeem under the expressway every day. Finally, Lorrie told Rakeem he wanted to go back to school. He tried to tell him about □the words□ and to encourage Rakeem to go back to school too.

Now, Lorrie gets on the bus for school. On the bus he sees his friend Joe Smalls, the only heterosexual boy in school who treats Lorrie kindly. He also sees Laura, □the only white girl in these projects that I know of.□ He says, □I feel sorry for her,□ even though when Lorrie gets on the bus she immediately calls him a □faggot□. Another girl joins in with more insults. Lorrie says nothing but keeps walking to the back of the bus: □It's the way I learned: keep moving.□ He sits next to Joe, who tells him how his baby's mother, Tareen, did his math homework for him the night before, even though she is no longer in school. Lorrie listens to Joe's story but all the while, □I feel all of the ears on us.□ □Keep moving,□ Lorrie repeatedly tells himself. Finally, the bus arrives at school.

When he gets off the bus, Rakeem is waiting for him. Rakeem is back in school now, thanks to Lorrie's encouragement, and tells Lorrie the news that he made it into Math 3. Lorrie congratulates him and says, □See what I told you before, Rakeem? You really got it in you to move on. You doing all right, man.□ Rakeem asks Lorrie to meet him later that night behind Rocky's Pizza. Lorrie is tempted, because he misses Rakeem, but tells himself, □The kids are enough. The words are important. They are all enough.□

In first period, Lorrie has science with Mr. D'Angelo. Lorrie has a crush on Mr. D'Angelo and smiles adoringly at him. A classmate notices and says, □Sometimes when a man's been married long he needs to experience a new kind of loving, ain't that what you think, Lorrie?□ This gets her thrown out of class by Mr. D'Angelo, who is perspiring, unnerved by Lorrie's attentions. Lorrie thinks to himself, □Mr. D'Angelo, I am in silent love in a loud body. So don't turn away. *Sweat*.□

In third period, Lorrie has Woodworking for You. He daydreams about □the kids□ while waiting to use the power saw. His friend Joe Smalls talks to him about how Tareen got half his math problems wrong. □Be glad you don't have to deal with no dumb-ass Tareen b□□,□ Joe says. Lorrie knows the other boys are listening to their conversation. Soon they all chime in: □Why you talking that s□□, Joe, man? Lorrie don't ever worry about b□□es!□ After several more comments, the teacher, Mr. Samuels, turns off the power saw and begins to laugh. Then he actually joins in: □Class, don't mess with the only *girl* we got in here!□ Encouraged, the boys pile on more insults, telling Lorrie to get out. Lorrie picks up his school bag and leaves the classroom. □Inside me there is really nothing except for Ma's voice: *Don't let them boys*.□

Layla Jackson comes to the school to drop off Tee Tee and see her boyfriend Tyrone (Tee Tee's father). Lorrie holds Tee Tee while Layla and Tyrone kiss each other. They are both HIV positive, and □Everyone says that they gave themselves AIDS and now have to kiss each other because there ain't no one else.□ Holding Tee Tee and watching Tyrone and Layla sends Lorrie into a reverie about his affair with Rakeem. He tells himself, □It will never be more.□

Lorrie arrives home with Tee Tee to find his mother upset; she needs Lorrie to watch Tommy and the kids while she goes out to bring Lula Jean home from the movies, □which is where she goes when she plans on leaving Tommy.□ Lorrie makes Tommy some tea and talks to him. Then he starts to get out his dictionary to learn his vocabulary words, but the kids want a bath and baby Tee Tee is sick. Lorrie realizes that he will know the words without studying; □The words are in my heart.□

Lorrie's mother comes home and sets things right: she gives Tommy a tongue-lashing, tells Layla to get her sick baby out of her house, and tells Lorrie she has not forgotten the special dinner she promised him, for learning his new words. Lorrie tells her they will practice the words later, □but I got to go meet Rakeem first.□ Lorrie's mother looks shocked but does not stop him. Lorrie is eager to see Rakeem, but he has learned from his earlier experience. □I am coming back home. And I am going to school

tomorrow. . . . I will be me for a few minutes behind Rocky's Pizza and I don't care if it's just a few minutes.□

Characters

Anita Adams

Anita is the only one of Lorrie's sisters who thinks he is beautiful. She is also protective of him; before he leaves for school she gives him a letter knife and tells him to use it on Rakeem if □that boy puts his thing on you.□

Lorrie Adams

Fourteen-year-old Lorrie Adams, whose full name is Lawrence Lincoln Jefferson Adams, is the main character of □Proper Library,□ and he narrates the story of his day. He is his mother's only son, and as she tells him, □the only real man I got.□ Lorrie is extremely bright, compassionate, and empathetic; he describes the plight of the only white girl on the bus, Laura, with great sympathy, even though the first thing she says when he boards the bus is □faggot.□ Lorrie's primary struggles as a gay teen are withstanding the persecution of his schoolmates and reconciling his ambition to make something of his life with his desire for Rakeem, his former lover. Lorrie describes the different loves of his life as □flavors of the pie,□ and his favorite flavor is the love he has for the children in the household. He channels all of his love and affection into caring for them, teaching them, entertaining them, even ironing their clothes. In fact, he has taken on the role of parent. It is never specified which children belong to which of Lorrie's sisters or cousins; he just calls them □the kids.□

Mrs. Cabrini

Mrs. Cabrini is the only teacher that encourages Lorrie; she tells him, □Put your mind to your dreams, my dear boy, and you will achieve them. You are your own universe, your own shooting star.□

Cousin Cee Cee

Cee Cee is Lorrie's critical, hostile cousin who delights in telling him how stupid he is to think he can make something of his life: □Practicing words like that! Is you a complete a□hole?□ When Lorrie tries to teach new words to her kids, Cee Cee tells him, □it will hurt their eyes to be doing all that reading and besides they are only eight and nine.□

Mr. D'Angelo

Mr. D'Angelo is Lorrie's science teacher, on whom he has a crush. Lorrie's obvious infatuation unnerves the teacher.

Layla Jackson

Layla Jackson is Rakeem's cousin who □might have AIDS.□ She and her boyfriend Tyrone have a baby they call Tee Tee. Like most of the women in the story, Layla's self-esteem hinges on her ability to keep Tyrone with her; at one point she falls apart because she suspects Tyrone (who is also HIV-positive) is going to a support group to meet other HIV-positive girls. Lorrie loves to hold baby Tee Tee, but Layla displays a lack of tenderness towards him; when Lorrie says he cannot take the baby until after fifth period, she says, □That means I got to take this brat to Introduction to Humanities with me. . . . He's gonna cry and I won't pass the test on Spanish Discoverers.□ She is the only girl in the story, however, who expresses any concern over her grades or schoolwork.

The Kids

Lorrie refers to the large brood of small children living with him and his mother as □the kids.□ Lasheema, Shawn, Sheniqua, Tonya, Tata, Willis, Byron, and Elizabeth are the names mentioned, but there are nine all together, and twelve if Lorrie's sister Samantha brings her children to the house.

Laura

Laura is the only white girl in the Bronx projects whom Lorrie knows. When some of the black girls at school threatened to beat her up, she cried and told them that her real parents were black. This made the other girls laugh, and they decided to make her their friend. Laura calls Lorrie a □faggot□ when he gets on the bus in the morning, and for the rest of the bus ride, □I can feel Laura's eyes like they are a silent machine gun.□

Lula Jean

Though Lula Jean, Lorrie's married sister, is mentioned frequently throughout the story, she is never actually at home until near the conclusion when Lorrie's mother brings her home from the movies, □where she goes when she plans on leaving Tommy.□ Even then she says nothing, but readers get an inkling of her character when Lorrie tells us, □They got four kids here and if Lula Jean leaves, I might have to drop out of school again because she doesn't want to be tied to anything that has Tommy's stamp on it.□ Clearly Lorrie feels a greater sense of responsibility towards □the kids□ than Lula Jean does.

Ma

Lorrie's mother is described as having □the same face as the maid in the movies.□ Whatever hopes or expectations she may have once had for her children now rest

squarely on Lorrie's shoulders. She is very affectionate with him; she has □big brown hands like careful shovels, and she loves to touch and pat and warm you up with them.□ After they have a good session practicing vocabulary words, she touches Lorrie's face with her hands and calls him, □Lawrence, My Fine Boy.□ She seems resigned to the irresponsible behavior of her other children and Tommy, Lula Jean's husband, even though caring for all of their children certainly places a burden on her and Lorrie.

Rakeem

Rakeem, the cousin of Lorrie's friend Layla Jackson, is Lorrie's former lover. Lorrie met Rakeem everyday under the Bruckner Expressway to have sex, instead of going to school. After six months' absence from school, Lorrie told Rakeem he wanted to go back. He has not been with Rakeem since, but he misses him. Lorrie tells himself again and again that he can do without Rakeem, that the love he has for his family will sustain him. Rakeem feels differently. He says to Lorrie, □you think I'm a look at my cousin Layla and her bastard and love them and that will be enough. But it will never be enough.□ Rakeem goes back to school, thanks to Lorrie's encouragement, and makes it into Math 3. He says, □Man, I don't got nothing in me except my brain that tells me: Nigger, first thing get your ass up in school. Make them know you can do it.□

Mr. Samuels

Mr. Samuels is Lorrie's teacher in Woodworking for You; according to Lorrie, □He doesn't fail me even though I don't do any cutting or measuring or shellacking. He wants me the hell out of there.□ When the other boys in class begin harassing Lorrie, Mr. Samuels joins in, calling Lorrie a □girl□.

Joe Smalls

Joe Smalls is the only heterosexual male friend that Lorrie has at school. He chats with Lorrie on the bus and in woodworking class about his girlfriend, Tareen. Though he does risk the disapproval of his friends in being kind to Lorrie, he is only willing to stick his neck out so far; when the other boys in Woodworking for You begin to hurl insults at Lorrie, □Joe Smalls is quiet and looking out the window.□

Aunt Estine Smith

Lorrie's Aunt Estine Smith, who lives with the family, insists that the children call her by both her first and last names. She is a bitter woman who □can't get out of her past□; her husband, David Saul Smith, was lynched from a tree in 1986, which Lorrie says is □her favorite time to make us all go back to.□ The only thing Lorrie admires about Aunt Estine is her backless blue organza dress. According to Lorrie, □Estine Smith is not someone but a walking hainted house.□ However, Estine does make one of the more

astute observations of the story when she grumbles about Tommy, □Why do we women feel we always need to teach them? They ain't going to learn the right way. They ain't going to learn s□□. That's why we always so alone.□ With the exception of Lorrie, this seems to be a fairly accurate summation of men's behavior in their world.

Tommy

Tommy, Lula Jean's husband, expresses the typical attitudes men have towards women in the story. Overall, Tommy does not seem to be a bad sort; before he arrives at the house with a different woman under his arm, Lorrie describes him with admiration. Tommy tells Lorrie what a □hidden genius□ he is, tests him on his math, and tells him jokes and stories from the Bible. When he kisses Lula Jean, Lorrie says, □he searches into Lula Jean's face for whole minutes.□ While the members of the household are angry with him for bringing home this strange woman, the fact that Lula Jean will stay with Tommy seems to be a foregone conclusion. When she does return, he berates her for threatening to leave him: □You keep going that way and you won't ever know how to keep a man, b□□.□

Themes

Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Gender roles in Lorrie's world are very narrowly defined, and the penalties for violating their boundaries are harsh. Men are not allowed to express tender emotions or vulnerability, and they regard women, at least outwardly, as second-class citizens valuable mainly for sex and childrearing. This dynamic is illustrated most vividly in the relationship between Lorrie's sister Lula Jean and her husband Tommy. Tommy clearly loves Lula Jean; when he kisses her □he searches into Lula Jean's face for whole minutes,□ and he tells Lorrie, □This is what love should be.□ Still, this attachment does not stop him from bringing home a strange woman and then lamenting later that □b□□es out here nowadays□ do not appreciate the things he does for them. Similarly, Joe Smalls' girlfriend Tareen stays up late doing his homework (even though she no longer goes to school because she is caring for their child) and then Joe complains bitterly when she gets some of the problems wrong, telling Lorrie that □that . . . Tareen b□□h . . . nearly got [me] an F in Math 3.□ For the men, portraying this image of machismo is crucial. These attitudes explain why only women in the story encourage or express affection for Lorrie. Of his two male teachers, one avoids him, and the other openly ridicules him; only Mrs. Cabrini has words of encouragement. The men are too threatened by the idea of being seen as possibly homosexual to treat Lorrie with common respect or kindness.

For the women, keeping a man is all-important, even if the men treat them poorly. For Layla Jackson, who is HIV positive, the main concern is not that she may fall ill and die, but that no boy will sleep with her for fear of contracting the virus. Her condition makes it doubly crucial that she hang onto Tyrone, who is also HIV positive. Many of the teenage girls in the story have babies, whom they seem to regard as an unfortunate by-product of keeping their man. The message given to these girls is clear: a woman without a man is nothing. Tommy makes this clear when Lula Jean returns home after threatening to leave him: □You keep going that way and you won't ever know how to keep a man, b□□h.□

The Importance of Words and Language

Lorrie's mother consistently impresses upon him the importance of proper language, the power of words. □Let's practice the words this afternoon when you get home, baby,□ is the first line in the story that she says to him. The title of the story is taken from his mother's insistence on □proper words with proper meanings,□ and Lorrie's difficulty with the word □library□. As he explains, □All my life I been saying that 'Liberry.' And even though I knew it was a place to read and do your studying, I still couldn't call it right. . . . I'm about doing things, you see, *finally* doing things right.□ Ironically, in the paragraph immediately following, his hostile Cousin Cee Cee attacks him with these words: □What you learning all that s□□for? . . . Is you a complete a□□hole?□ Cee Cee

passes her attitude onto her children, discouraging them from reading and learning new words with Lorrie.

The damaging and self-defeating attitudes that plague the characters in □Proper Library□ reveal themselves in the language they use. The word □b□□h□ is used, not as a profanity or insult, but as a matter-of-fact synonym for □girl□ or □woman.□ The dialogue of nearly every character in the story is liberally laced with profanity. In fact, as with the word □b□□h,□ the profanity has become so commonplace that it is no longer even recognized as profanity; it is the standard. Lorrie is the only character who does not use profanity in the story; even his mother says to Layla Jackson, □Layla, you can get . . . out of here . . . do your 'ho'ing somewhere out on the street where you belong.□ The most important words, however, the ones that sustain Lorrie and give him the ability to cope with his situation, also come from his mother. His mother calls him □Lawrence, My Fine Boy.□ She tells him, □You are on your way to good things.□ Even the name she has given him reflects her high expectations: Lawrence Lincoln Jefferson Adams.

Love and Sex as Nourishment

A recurring theme of □Proper Library□ is the idea that love and sex are nourishment, as critical and as life-sustaining as food. This theme is introduced in the first two paragraphs of the story. □Boys, men, girls, children, mothers, babies. . . .You always got to keep them fed. Winter summer. They always have to feel satisfied.□ The second paragraph lists sources of nourishment: □Formula, pancakes, syrup, milk, roast turkey with cornbread stuffing. Popsicles, love, candy, tongue kisses, hugs, kisses behind backs, hands on faces, warmth, tenderness, Boston cream pie, f□□ing in the butt.□ Lorrie calls the many different kinds of love in his life □flavors of the pie.□ It is this love that gives him the strength to remain optimistic despite the persecution he faces every day at school. □Love is a pie and I am lucky enough to have almost every flavor in mine,□ he says. He says □almost□ all the flavors, because he is no longer seeing Rakeem. Though the teen mothers in the story seem to feel little tenderness towards their children, Lorrie's love for the kids is his □favorite flavor of the pie.□

Often when Lorrie feels or experiences love in the story, food is nearby. His love affair with Rakeem occurs under the expressway □where the Spanish women sometimes go to buy oranges and apples and watermelons cheap.□ Rakeem tells him not to go back to school, and Lorrie agrees: □A part of me was saying that his ear was more delicious than Math 4.□ When Rakeem asks Lorrie to meet him later, the location for the meeting is behind □Rocky's Pizza.□

The love he gets from his mother represents another □flavor of the pie.□ When he leaves for school, his mother is making pancakes, and she promises him a special dinner if he studies his vocabulary words. They practice Lorrie's vocabulary words in the kitchen.

The withholding of food and of love are described similarly. Aunt Estine, who rarely has a kind or optimistic word for anyone, tells the household, □Lazy . . . Negroes you better

not be specting me to cook y'all breakfast when you do get up!□ When Layla gives baby Tee Tee a rare kiss on the forehead, Lorrie says, □he glows with what I know is drinking up an oasis when you are in the desert for so long.□

Style

Point of View

The story is told in the first-person point of view by Lorrie. Readers are privy to Lorrie's thoughts and emotions. This is important, because it is Lorrie's compassionate, kind, and optimistic thoughts that keep the story from being a bleak portrayal of inner-city life. Also, because few characters in the story have taken the time to really get to know Lorrie, any other point of view would give the reader an incomplete portrait of him. Rakeem does not fully understand his love for the kids; his mother and family do not want to hear about his desires for Rakeem. This is a taboo subject; when Lorrie says he is going to meet Rakeem, □Ma has got what will be tears on her face because she can't say no and she can't ask any questions.□

Flashbacks, Punctuation, and Repeated Phrases

Though □Proper Library□ tells the story of just one day in Lorrie's life, readers learn much more about him and his family through flashbacks that are separated from the current-day story by blank space. The current-day story is written in the present tense, while the flashbacks are written in the past tense. Quotation marks are not used when characters talk; combined with the shifting from present to past tense, the absence of quotation marks gives the story a fluid, stream-of-consciousness quality, as if the story is being thought on the page, rather than written. Often commas and other punctuation are omitted. For instance, when Layla Jackson approaches Lorrie to ask him to baby sit Tee Tee, she says, □Thanks Lorrie man I got a favor to ask you please don't tell me no please man.□ After which Lorrie tells the reader, □Layla always makes her words into a worry sandwich.□

One phrase Lorrie repeats throughout the story is □keep moving.□ Whenever schoolmates are harassing him, he repeats the phrase in his head. In these emotional situations the language keeps moving, also, through the omission of commas or the repeated use of □and□ to connect thoughts in a stream. When he is forced to leave woodworking class, he tells the reader, □My bones and my brain and my heart would just crumble if it wasn't for that swirling wind of nothing in me that keeps me moving and moving.□ When Laura calls him a □faggot□ on the bus and then continues to stare at him, he thinks, □Keep moving. The bus keeps rolling and you always have to keep moving. Like water like air like outer space.□ The phrase has a positive meaning as well; Lorrie teaches the kids math, because he believes, □It's these numbers that keep them moving and that will keep them moving when I am gone.□ Other phrases that are repeated throughout the story include Lorrie's □flavors of the pie□ metaphor, the □click, click□ of Aunt Estine's impatient heels, and □I feel all of the ears on us,□ which he says both times he talks to Joe Smalls during the story.

Setting

Outside his home, Lorrie's world is hard, both literally and figuratively. His love affair with Rakeem is conducted not in the comfort of a bed or even the back seat of a car, but underneath the concrete bridge supports of the expressway, in a broken shopping cart. When Lorrie tells the story of how Rakeem escaped some gang members by telling them he had AIDS, he describes how the boys ran off, □rubbing their hands on the sides of the buildings on the Grand Concourse.□ In woodworking class, the teacher's face □is like a piece of lumber. Mr. Samuels is never soft.□ Images and threats of violence follow Lorrie throughout the day. Before he steps out the door, his sister gives him a letter knife to carry with him to school. The boys threatening him in woodworking class are using a power saw; one of them tells Lorrie to □take your sissy ass out of here 'less you want me to cut it into four pieces.□ And when Laura stares him down on the bus, her eyes are □a silent machine gun.□

At home, the images are soft, full of the warmth of human contact. His mother strokes his face with her hands; some of the kids, wanting their hair done, come to Lorrie and □sit around my feet like shoes□; all the kids pile on the bed with Tommy and Lula Jean as they are kissing. As Lorrie says, □I know I am taken care of.□

Historical Context

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

When acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) was first recognized in the 1980s it was looked upon by many as a □gay plague,□ a disease only affecting homosexual men. By the time this story was written in 1993, however, thousands of heterosexuals had died of AIDS, and low income African Americans in the inner city were especially at risk, for several reasons. First, intravenous drug use is more prevalent in inner-city neighborhoods, and the sharing of contaminated drug paraphernalia is one of the most common methods of contracting the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). In addition, drug use also impairs judgment and increases the likelihood that the user will engage in unprotected sexual intercourse. As a result, it is estimated that as many as 30 percent of all AIDS cases are caused directly or indirectly by intravenous drug use. Second, teens in the inner city are more sexually active and more likely to have unprotected sex (as is demonstrated by the high rate of teen pregnancy). Lorrie, as a gay teen having unprotected sex in the inner city, is at extremely high risk of getting the HIV virus.

In 1991, two years before this story was published, basketball great Magic Johnson announced that he had HIV, and in the same year this story was released, tennis star Arthur Ashe died of AIDS, which he had contracted through a contaminated blood transfusion. These two high-profile cases made many more African Americans aware of the dangers AIDS posed to everyone, not just to gay men. The number of known deaths from AIDS in the United States reached a peak in 1993, with 41,920 Americans dying of the disease, up from 23,411 in 1992.

Racial Unrest: The Rodney King Case

On March 3, 1991, Los Angeles police stopped black motorist Rodney King on a drunken driving charge; King resisted arrest and was brutally beaten by the officers. A bystander videotaped the incident, and the four police officers were charged with assault. On April 29, 1992, the officers were acquitted, triggering six days of massive rioting in Los Angeles. Fifty-four people were killed and hundreds of buildings were damaged or destroyed. In a federal trial in 1993, two of the officers were found guilty of violating King's civil rights and were sentenced to thirty months in prison. To many in the African American community and elsewhere, the case was a frustrating example of discrimination in the justice system. This sentiment was further intensified when the venue of the original case was moved from Los Angeles, where the incident had occurred, to Simi Valley, a suburb with a much smaller African American population and a disproportionately large number of law-enforcement officers.

Critical Overview

At the time that □Proper Library□ was first published, Carolyn Ferrell was just beginning her career as a published author. Tobias Wolff selected the story for *Best American Short Stories, 1994*, which brought Ferrell's work to the attention of Janet Silver, an editor at Houghton Mifflin. Silver asked Ferrell if she had a book manuscript, but Ferrell had just three stories to show her at the time. Those three stories were enough to earn a first book contract.

The book, *Don't Erase Me*, which was released in 1997, earned Ferrell both critical acclaim and awards. The journal *Ploughshares*, in which □Proper Library□ was originally published, gave *Don't Erase Me* the John C. Zacharis First Book Award; the *Los Angeles Times* awarded it the Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. In their praise of the collection, critics often mention Ferrell's talent for authentic dialogue. A reviewer from the *Washington Post Book World* writes, □Carolyn Ferrell has a gift for the authentic spoken voice□male and female, black and biracial, gay and straight." In a review of the book in *Ploughshares*, Elizabeth Searle agrees: □To create such fully realized voices, Ferrell capitalizes on her keen ear and her playful sense of speech rhythms. Her characters come to life in dead-on dialogue.□

Critics also note how many of her characters (such as Lorrie) maintain a spark of hope despite their grim situations, giving the stories an uplifting quality. The reviewer from the *Washington Post Book World* writes that Ferrell's characters □never stop hoping for a better life, doggedly pursuing their goals and struggling to maintain their integrity rather than succumb to despair.□ Other reviewers feel that Ferrell's poetic and compassionate use of language also helps to soften the harsh reality of the world she describes. A review in *Publishers Weekly* states, □While hope is in short supply for many of Ferrell's characters, her poignant and often poetic language shines brightly, illuminating a harsh world.□ Katharine Whittemore, in the *New York Times Book Review*, also praises the poetic quality of Ferrell's writing: □You're tempted to cull a glossary of phrases from DON'T ERASE ME . . . but her book is much more than poetic plums.□

Though *Don't Erase Me* is the only book Ferrell had published as of 2005, her stories have been anthologized in numerous collections, and she was as of that year at work on her first novel.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a bachelor of arts from University of Michigan and twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In this essay, Pryor examine how Lorrie's homosexuality actually benefits him in his inner-city neighborhood.

Millions of gay and lesbian teens have found that their sexual orientation makes them the subject of ridicule, cruelty, and persecution. This is certainly the case for Lorrie Adams in Carolyn Ferrell's □Proper Library.□ From the minute he steps onto the bus in the morning until he returns home in the afternoon, Lorrie is constantly on his guard, reminding himself to □keep moving.□ He can feel the hostility of his schoolmates, and he knows they are watching his every move; he can even □feel the ears□ on him when he engages in innocent conversation with his friend Joe. Even before his woodworking classmates begin to harass him, he knows what is coming: □I'm feeling the rest of the ears on us, latching, readying. I pause to heaven. I am thinking I wish Ma had taught me how to pray.□

Because Lorrie is a black teen living in the inner city, however, his homosexuality is a source not just of persecution, but also protection. For instance, Rakeem escapes some gang members by telling them he has AIDS; because Rakeem is gay, they believe him and run away. Clearly in Lorrie's neighborhood the image of AIDS as a □gay disease□ still persists (though, in fact, the two people in the story who actually are HIV positive are heterosexual).

Lorrie's homosexuality gives him an advantage greater than just protection from physical violence; the greatest benefit Lorrie gains from being gay is freedom from the strict code of behavior adhered to by the heterosexual men in his world. The other men and boys in □Proper Library□ have been taught to deny any tenderness, vulnerability, or need; in their relationships with women the goal is to avoid any commitment or dependence. Lorrie's father, in his complete absence from the story, is an example by omission: he is never mentioned. Women are seen primarily as potential sexual conquests, and sex is the primary preoccupation of Lorrie's classmates. A boy named Franklin in Lorrie's shop class sums it up this way: □Hey, Lorrie, man, tell me what you think about, then? What can be better than thinking about how you going to get to that hole, man?□

For Lorrie, the sheer impossibility of conforming to the neighborhood standard of machismo frees him from those limiting gender boundaries. Because the men in his community would prefer to deny the existence of homosexual black men, no comparable code of behavior or social role exists for them, and Lorrie is free to invent himself as he goes along, feeling connected to the children and caring about others. Many critics cite this denial of homosexuality in the black community as a reason for the neglect of AIDS issues by black leaders and politicians (especially male black leaders).

Homosexuality seems to be a greater advantage for Lorrie than it is for Rakeem, perhaps because Lorrie is more effeminate. There are some cues that this is the case. For instance, Aunt Estine, speaking of her past in the South, tells Lorrie that if he had □twitched [his] ass down there like [he does] here, they woulda hung [him] up just by [his] black balls.□ Rakeem, being less effeminate, still feels it is possible for him to fit in. As he tells Lorrie, □I got to get people to like me and to stop seeing me. . . . So I got to hide *me* for a while. Then you watch, Lorrie, man: much people will be on my side!□ Unlike Rakeem, Lorrie has accepted the fact that fitting in at school is not possible for him; he is satisfied to fit in at home, with his mother and the kids. Rakeem also seems to attach greater importance to sex than Lorrie does. When they have sex under the expressway, Rakeem tells Lorrie, □This is where your real world begins, man.□ Lorrie, however, considers his desire for Rakeem only another □flavor of the pie.□

Being gay, Lorrie avoids not just the expectations and stereotypes for men in his community, but also the roles adhered to by the women. Ironically, Lorrie has more of the positive qualities one normally associates with femininity than the girls in the story do. He is more maternal, nurturing, and protective towards the children in the story than their own mothers. Yet because Lorrie is a boy, he escapes the low expectations his community has for women. For instance, Lorrie's mother takes the time to coach him on his vocabulary words, make sure he has all his books in order before he goes to school, and exhorts him to do things □the proper way.□ There is no indication that she has ever done any of this for her daughters, and the fact that her house is full of their children on a daily basis implies that doing things □the proper way□ was not made a high priority for the girls in the house. Their choice of men is another example of these low expectations; of the two husbands mentioned in the story, one is unfaithful, and the other is physically abusive. With the exception of Layla Jackson, who struggles to continue her education with Tee Tee in tow and the specter of AIDS following her, none of the girls in the story appears to have goals greater than getting a man and hanging onto him (the latter being something all the men have been taught to avoid). Given the men they choose, these goals are not very high.

Another reason Lorrie is less affected by the expectations and stereotypes of his community is that few of the people who ascribe to these rules of behavior are willing to spend time with Lorrie. Lorrie's companions are either too young to have internalized these attitudes (the kids) or are compassionate enough to ignore them (Joe Smalls, Layla Jackson). His own kind and compassionate nature is supported by their friendship.

Though most teens would not volunteer for the persecution Lorrie endures each day, his inability to conform to his peers' standards of behavior may well be his means for one day rising above them. Without being coerced into living within the dominant code, Lorrie is able to think and feel for himself, which in the long run is the ultimate freedom.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on □Proper Library,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, he discusses the way the protagonist copes with adversity in Proper Library *and compares the story to modernist works such as* Ulysses *and* The Great Gatsby*.*

Towards the end of Carolyn Ferrell's "Proper Library," the schoolboy protagonist, Lorrie, decides to learn three new words to impress his mother. The words themselves are interesting, in that they seem to relate to Lorrie's situation as described in the story. The first is "soliloquy," a word that implies being alone and unheard, among the most famous soliloquies being the sad solitary speeches made by Hamlet in William Shakespeare's famous play of that name. The word "soliloquy" means talking to oneself, and the whole story is one in which the reader enters Lorrie's thoughts and in effect overhears him talking to himself about his lonely, unhappy life.

The second word is "disenfranchise," meaning to deprive someone of rights and power, which certainly seems to be Lorrie's situation: he seems trapped in a world full of responsibility without rights. He is responsible for taking care of numerous children and must endure all sorts of abuse from schoolmates, and also from at least one teacher, because he is gay. At times he feels totally isolated and alone, and his only recourse is to "keep moving," a refrain of his, which means not just physical moving, though he does that to escape some unpleasant situations, but also psychological or metaphorical moving, to escape in his head by remembering something pleasant while nasty things are happening.

The third word is "catechism," perhaps the most interesting one of all. Narrowly the word means an instructional book about the principles of religion. Lorrie, however, has no religion, something he regrets when he is caught in a difficult situation and wishes he could pray. At least, he has no orthodox religion; he does have some mystical moments concerning words and numbers which seem almost religious, and so the word is relevant not just in pointing out the lack of religion in Lorrie's life but also in reminding the reader that Lorrie does have a form of religion of an unorthodox kind, something he perhaps needs to sustain him.

The word "catechism" can also be taken in a more general sense, simply to mean any book of instruction in principles and rules. In this sense it makes an ironic contrast with Lorrie's approach to life, because Lorrie is the antithesis of rule-following. Even setting out to learn three words at this moment is in a way breaking a rule. He goes on to say that his mother had promised him a big turkey dinner if he learned four new words. Four words, not three, but Lorrie decides to learn three. It is as if he cannot do what is expected of him; he cannot bring himself to follow the rules. He follows his own path, most notably in his sexuality. So while his schoolfellows are all talking about pursuing girls, he has no interest in that, being gay, and he suffers because they mock him and call him names as a result.

Lorrie's inability to follow the rules can be seen as well in his approach to math. He seems to love math. He teaches math to the other children, and yet he keeps failing the math tests and is held back as a result. The problem is that his love of math seems to be a love of the feel of the numbers. At least, when he teaches math to the others, they □like the feel of the numbers and seeing them on a piece of paper.□ This response is an example of the religious feeling Lorrie seems to bring to the world or at least an example of how he is more interested in feeling than in reasoning and abstraction. However, reasoning and abstraction and getting the right answer are needed to pass the math tests and that is why he keeps failing. He seems to be almost mystically in tune with numbers; he can give □real live explanations□ of them, but on the tests he is not given a chance to provide these explanations: □the people don't ask any questions: they just hold me back.□ He fails and as a result is in danger of not fulfilling his dream of going to college.

The mystical approach to numbers can also be seen in Lorrie's approach to words. It turns out that there is no time for him to sit down with the dictionary to study his three chosen words, because □the kids come in and want me to give them a bath and baby Tee Tee has a fever and is throwing up all over the place.□ His responsibilities intervene; with his mother at work, he is the one who is constantly looking after the children, and at least in this instance that means he cannot take the time to study his dictionary. But not doing so does not seem to matter. □I look at the words,□ he says, □and suddenly I know I will know them without studying.□ Now, perhaps the reader is supposed to find this foolish, to see it as a feeble excuse for not studying, but it does seem that Lorrie has an intuitive side that allows him to connect to things such as his words in an unorthodox way. But this intuitiveness or mysticism or emphasis on feelings over rationality often seems to put him at odds with the society around him.

Another problem for Lorrie could be referred to as a clash of desires. He really enjoys taking care of the children. When he is being called names on the bus, he consoles himself by remembering his four-year-old sister, Lasheema, whose hair he braids. He remembers enjoying the feel of her hair and remembers feeling ecstatic when he and Lasheema look at themselves in the mirror. When one of his schoolmates hands him her baby to take care of, he enjoys that too. He says, □Tee Tee likes to be in my arms. I like for him to be there.□ But as already mentioned, fulfilling his desire to take care of children can interfere with his desire to learn words, with his desire for education. The opening paragraph of the story indicates that the responsibility of taking care of others is not all fun; it seems rather to be an unbearable burden: □it's never-ending, never-stopping,□ he says.

Another clash of desires involves Lorrie's relationship with his boyfriend, Rakeem. Lorrie feels good around Rakeem, so good that at one point in the past he stayed out of school for six months to be with Rakeem beneath the Bruckner Expressway, sitting in a broken shopping cart while Rakeem comforted him and made love to him. Clearly, the desire for Rakeem interfered with his desire for education. As the story begins Lorrie has sworn off seeing his old boyfriend, and yet just as clearly he misses him. Only with Rakeem, he thinks, can he □be me,□ and so he decides to see him again behind Rocky's Pizza. He somehow hopes that he can combine his sexual love and his desire

for education. Before he gave up seeing Rakeem, he had thought he could bring Rakeem into the world of words, saying, □Hey, wasn't there enough room for him and me and the words?□ At the time Rakeem had said, in a very rude way, No. Now Lorrie is hoping that somehow Rakeem may be ready.

It may be a foolish hope, but it is somehow contagious; it infects the reader. Here is a young boy, fourteen years old, who is shunned by almost everyone because he is gay, who is weighed down by almost impossible family responsibilities, who at times feels very depressed and alone, but who somehow by the end of the story is full of positive feeling, making the story itself feel positive. In this way it is somewhat reminiscent of the novel *Ulysses* by James Joyce, in which the struggles of Leopold and Molly Bloom are somehow overcome in the characters' minds so that the book ends with an affirmation (Molly Bloom's □Yes□) rather than anything depressing. Another similarity between Ferrell's story and Joyce's novel is that both use the technique of □stream of consciousness□; that is, the story is narrated through the characters' unedited, free-flowing thoughts.

The ending of □Proper Library□ is, it is true, a bit different from the □Yes□ at the end of *Ulysses*. Just before the end of Ferrell's story, there is the uplifting moment in which Lorrie goes off to see Rakeem with the hope that somehow he can integrate his love life and his desire for education. But at the very end of the story, as Lorrie goes out the door, a description is given of his sister, Lula Jean, being angrily berated by her cheating husband. It is a reminder that things are not always pleasant and do not always work out.

It seems unlikely that Lorrie can integrate all his desires and get everything he wants. Here is a gay youth who loves children, who wants to be able to nurture children. □Me, I love me some kids,□ he says. □I need me some kids.□ One does wonder how he will get some, being gay. There are also the obstacles of race and class. Lorrie is an African American youth living in a very poor neighborhood. Without explicitly saying so, the story seems to suggest that this background will make life difficult for Lorrie too. Lorrie is a poor, black, gay youth who wants education, love, and family; one can see the problems.

Yet the story has an upbeat feel to it. There is the stark reminder at the very end of the problems in relationships. There are moments earlier on when Lorrie seems quite depressed, most notably in his first class of the day, when a schoolmate mocks his sexual orientation right in class and he thinks: □why does every day start out one way hopeful but then point to the fact that ain't nothing ever going to happen?□ Later in that same class, when the teacher springs a surprise quiz on them, Lorrie says that all the students are unhappy as a result, □but no one is more than me, knowing that nothing will ever happen the way I'd like it to.□

But this pessimism does not sum up Lorrie's general attitude. Shortly after this low point halfway through the story the pendulum begins to swing the other way. First, there is a low point in shop class when even the teacher joins in the mockery, calling Lorrie a girl; next Lorrie remembers being with Rakeem. In an almost defiant moment, he holds onto

his love even though he is mocked for it, and this moment is mixed in with Lorrie's watching two HIV-positive people kiss; in the midst of their disease they can love, just as in the midst of being humiliated, Lorrie can love.

It is instructive in this context to consider Lorrie's attitude to his aunt Estine. Aunt Estine is constantly talking about the past and being depressed about it. Lorrie cannot stand this attitude. He thinks she would be better off escaping by putting on a fancy dress and dancing around rather than dwelling on a horrible moment which occurred years before. □I never want to be like her, ever,□ he says, and he is not like her, not usually. He keeps looking ahead, not back, and except for occasional moments keeps a positive attitude.

Early in the story, Lorrie, in what seems like a repetition of things his mother has told him, says, □Things got be in place. There has to be order.□ Later his mother is insistent that he learn □proper words with proper meanings□ and that he learn to □say them right.□ In trying to go along with what his mother wants, he looks up the word □library□ and discovers that it is not pronounced □liberry□ as he had always thought. Now he is dedicated to saying that word, and other words, correctly.

This dedication sounds admirable, but the reader may have doubts about Lorrie as the devotee of order and doing things right. Lorrie is not someone who follows orders well, and he is not someone who does things right; at least, he is not someone who does things according to social norms. He is gay in a straight world. He approaches numbers through his feelings and words through his intuitions. His cousin Cee Cee tells him he is not □normal,□ and according to social standards perhaps he is not. He does have talents, though. One of the teachers at school, Mrs. Cabrini, tells him his intelligence will take him far, adding, □Put your mind to your dreams, my dear boy, and you will achieve them.□

Indeed maybe he will. Though he wants family and education while at the same time pursuing a homosexual relationship with someone who distrusts learning, though he keeps failing math because he feels the numbers instead of getting the right answers, though he learns only three words when he is supposed to learn four, though his family responsibilities interfere with his studying, maybe somehow it will all work out. After all, his lover Rakeem does go back to school too, suggesting that perhaps Lorrie can bring him into his world of words after all. When his mother comes home at the end of the story, she says she remembers she promised him □that special dinner,□ as if he will get the dinner without having learned the fourth word. Maybe a person can succeed after all the story seems to be saying. Maybe despite obstacles and adversity there is still hope. Maybe even a person who does not fit in can find his place or at least try.

The story seems to recommend trying, not complaining and brooding, in the manner of Aunt Estine, who at the end of story hits her head on the doorframe, as if the author is punishing her for her negative attitude. The story seems to suggest trying to accomplish things, trying to fulfill one's desires. It is an attitude again reminiscent of Joyce's *Ulysses* and of one stream of the early twentieth-century modernist movement: though the universe may be hostile or incomprehensible, though it may be impossible to succeed,

the point is to try anyway, to □beat on . . . against the current,□ as F. Scott Fitzgerald puts it at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. There seems to be a strong current running against Lorrie, but he is beating on against it in a positive way that makes the reader hope he will succeed, whatever doubts there may be.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on □Proper Library,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Remy is a freelance writer in Warrington, Florida. In the following essay, he examines the ways in which Ferrell's characters struggle against social norms as they pursue their individual dreams and desires.

In □Proper Library,□ Ferrell offers the reader a gritty urban landscape populated by characters who struggle to be free. However, as a result of the social mores that shape the community in which they live, all of the story's characters but one are governed by what they believe they *should* do, whether it is choosing a particular group of friends, making good grades at school, being faithful to a partner or spouse, or, as in Lorrie's case, upholding the idea of what it is to be a man. Thus, by exploring conventional beliefs about education, relationships, and identity, Ferrell reveals her characters' innermost conflicts and desires, all the while instilling her fictional world with a renewed sense of hope.

An important social pressure the story addresses is the need to belong to a group, especially if a character has been marginalized because of race or sexual orientation. For example, Laura, a white girl whose □blue eyes and red hair□ and □thin flippy hair in cornrows□ stand out among a bus full of dark African American girls, remains unaware that she is often an object of ridicule by the very group she wishes to join. Nevertheless, she tries to earn her place within it, even though her physical appearance, let alone her personality and temperament, are clearly different from those of the B-Crew Girls. The need to belong to a group that will protect her from isolation is so strong that Laura invents a new identity for herself: she tells her classmates that she is □really a Negro□ of southern heritage. Furthermore, in an attempt to prove herself worthy of the group, Laura attacks Lorrie (the similarity in their names may be intentional, as both characters exist in society's margins) by calling him, □Faggot.□ At best, however, Laura is merely tolerated. She is a □mascot□ rather than a member. In the end, her attempts to win favor go unrewarded, for the B-Crew Girls do not bother to wake her when the bus reaches her stop.

Similarly, Lorrie and Rakeem emulate the girls' counterparts, the B-Crew Boys, but only to a point. When meeting for the first time after a few weeks, if not months, Lorrie and Rakeem greet each other with the B-Crew Boy handshake□but that's as far as the association goes, a fact Lorrie acknowledges when he says, □Only we are not B-Crew members, we get run over by the B-Crew.□ Lorrie is well aware that he is an outsider, a pariah, who, because he is homosexual, will never belong to the neighborhood's main social group of boys. Furthermore, the B-Crew Boys have already threatened Rakeem with physical violence in an attempt to steal his sneakers, yet he was able to scare them away by telling them that he has contracted AIDS from his cousin, a lie that, ironically enough, may have saved him from injury but which confirms his status as an outsider. Unlike Laura, who abandons her identity to belong to a group, Lorrie and Rakeem merely appropriate the B-Crew Boys' rituals to form a brotherhood of two.

Another social norm that exerts itself upon the characters in □Proper Library□ is the belief that one can improve one's chances for a better future through education. This value is reinforced, even by those who do not necessarily subscribe to it, as Lorrie teaches his younger brothers and sisters Math 4 concepts with the hope that they will be able to succeed later in life. □It's these numbers that keep them moving and that will keep them moving when I am gone,□ he observes. In Ferrell's fictional world, there is always hope. For example, Layla, a teenage mother with a chaotic life, becomes upset at the thought of missing her Spanish Discovers test because she cannot find a babysitter. Layla focuses intently on the present so that her past mistake will not interfere with her future. Other students in her situation might have abandoned their studies without making half the effort. Even Rakeem, a streetwise character who once disparaged Lorrie for going to school, wants to make good grades, but only so that he will become popular. □I got to get people to like me and to stop seeing me,□ he says. Perhaps, if he makes good grades and is thus able to blend in with the majority of students, no one will notice that he is gay. □You really got it in you to move on,□ Lorrie tells Rakeem. Lorrie does not pass judgment on Rakeem's need to conform; rather, he generously offers his support because he wants his beloved to succeed.

Lorrie, the story's protagonist and narrator, feels more strongly than other characters the need to improve his life through education because, thus far, he has shown the most promise academically. However, at times this promise almost becomes a burden for him. He is smart enough to teach Math 4 to the kids, yet he remains enrolled in a Math 1 class. More important, he fails the city exams every year and is held back. □I know it's no real fault of mine,□ Lorrie says, but one wonders if he is not purposefully defying his family's and his teachers' expectations of him. □Put your mind to your dreams, my dear boy, and you will achieve them. You are your own universe, you are your own shooting star,□ one teacher reminds him. Lorrie takes this advice to heart, his narrative voice often shifting from first to second person, as though he is giving himself instructions. Lorrie strives for a better life, yet he knows that his dreams and desires do not necessarily coincide with those of his community.

The expectations Lorrie feels most strongly, however, are those expressed at home. Lorrie's mother appreciates his efforts to become a better student, yet she believes that his success depends upon his meeting an acknowledged standard rather than on his fulfilling his individual promise by virtue of his own means. □Lawrence, My Fine Boy,□ Lorrie recalls his mother saying, □[y]ou are on your way to good things. You just got to do things the proper way.□ Lorrie concentrates on learning his vocabulary words not to please his mother but because he knows that words, not numbers, are instruments of persuasion, for it is through words that he will eventually communicate his heart's desire. Words represent the future, in as much as they can express the unknown, yet they also express hope and fulfillment, especially with regard to the search for love. □I'm about doing things, you see, *finally* doing things right,□ Lorrie says. Defying expectation, Lorrie vows to become the person he wants to be, according to his own criteria and in his own time.

Cultural ideas and traditions are often so imbedded within a society that they dictate how relationships should be conducted in both life and death. For instance, Aunt Estine

never mentions the good times she shared with her husband, David, who was lynched by a mob; instead, she keeps her husband's memory alive by evoking his death. In the end, nothing remains but a grim reminder that death is stronger than love. (Layla and Tyrone, the couple purported to have AIDS, also echo this theme, though they openly demonstrate their love for each other as if time has stood still.) Estine keeps herself alive by constantly reminding everyone that she is alone. She wears her widowhood like a badge of honor, yet the memory of her marriage does not provide her with solace.

Lorrie observes that Aunt Estine has turned her back on life and embraced death, an existential perspective symbolized by the blue evening gown that hangs in the closet. The dress represents what Estine once was□a vivacious young woman who enjoyed parties, dances, the nightlife□and not the bitter crone she has become. Lorrie sees Aunt Estine as living in the past. For him, her words represent her inability to escape the past. □If you can escape, why don't you all the time?□ he wonders. □You could dance and fling your arms and maybe even feel love from some direction. You would not perish. *You* could be free.□ He concludes that □Estine Smith is not someone but a walking hainted house.□ Her identity has become synonymous with the past, a past which she inhabits like a ghost.

Tommy and Lula, by contrast, struggle with mores concerning fidelity and the responsibilities a man should fulfill for his family. Though Tommy expresses his love for Lula like a dreamy newlywed, saying, □This is what love should be,□ whenever he gazes into her eyes, he also sees other women on the side. When Lorrie catches Tommy with another woman, Lorrie, usually an understanding and forgiving person, immediately hates him for betraying Lula. Tommy justifies his philandering by telling Lorrie, □Man, you don't know these [b□□]es out here nowadays. You want to show them love, a good time, and a real deep part of yourself and all they do is not appreciate it and try to make your life miserable.□ Lorrie knows that Tommy's words cannot justify his infidelity, especially when Tommy espouses his love for Lula: □Well, at least I got Lula,□ he says. □Now that's some woman.□ Does the search for true love extend beyond society's moral boundaries? In Tommy's case, definitely not, but Ferrell allows the reader to decide if Lorrie's quest for love and identity does not transcend what would otherwise be obstacles to his happiness.

In the community, fidelity is not only a man's chief responsibility to his wife and family but also a measure of his worth. When Lula finds out about Tommy's latest peccadillo, Lorrie's mother tells her son-in-law, □You are a stupid heel. Learn how to be a man.□ In her eyes, a □man□ is steadfast and faithful. A □man□ does not take his wife for granted and run around with other women□in broad daylight, no less! Aunt Estine expresses the frustration the women in the community feel when their men refuse to abide by the social code: □Why do we women feel we always need to teach them? They ain't going to learn the right way. They ain't going to learn s□□t. That's why we always so alone.□ Tommy's hypocritical words and actions have a positive effect on Lorrie, however. He sees the possessive side of love and decides that his love must be given freely to Rakeem, without expecting anything in return.

Lorrie also feels pressure to be a □man,□ someone who will provide for his family. He routinely prepares meals when Aunt Estine or his mother is too busy, and he makes sure the kids know their math lessons before he undertakes his own studies. Without Lorrie, the house would no longer be a refuge for his immediate family and even for members of the community. However, his homosexuality threatens the family's home life, as transitory as it is, because he is often the target of aggression. His absence, for whatever reason, would endanger the family's security because he takes on so many of the responsibilities that the □man of the house□ traditionally would perform. □Lorrie,□ his mother reminds him, □you are my only son, the only real man I got. I don't want them boys to get you from me.□ Aunt Estine issues a more stern warning, telling Lorrie that, if he behaved in the South the way he does here, he would be hung by his □black balls□ from a tree. His sister Anita is also aware of the violent responses Lorrie's sexuality arouses in other people. □You are my best man, remember that,□ she tells Lorrie, giving him a letter opener with which he can defend himself.

Outside the home, Lorrie must prove that he is a man by withstanding the taunts and jeers of his classmates, many of whom are cruel and merciless in making fun of his homosexuality. On the bus, his classmates call □[f]aggot,□ and □tight-ass homo□ while in woodworking class, the most masculine subject offered at school, Lorrie's classmates tease him because he does not have a girlfriend. Even the instructor joins in, saying, □Class, don't mess with the only *girl* we got in here!□ Whenever these assaults occur, Lorrie steels himself by reminding himself to □Keep moving, keep moving.□ He proves that he is a man by refusing to fight back. Lorrie remains true to himself, refusing to let the cruelty of his classmates deter him from becoming his own person, and in order to do this he must make others' expectations secondary to his own.

Lorrie refers to his struggle for identity when he says that his mother named him □for someone else,□ not the person he has become. He confers the name Lorrie upon himself because it best suits his personality, his idea of himself. His given name, □Lawrence Lincoln Jefferson Adams,□ recalls two of the greatest U.S. emancipators, and Ferrell establishes the association to remind readers that Lorrie yearns to be free. He wants to find love and express the love he feels within himself, even though that love contradicts dominant social mores. Lorrie's growing sense of who he is remains tied to movement, though this concept is not expressed consciously or in clear terms, for Lorrie often finds himself in survival mode. □Keep moving□ suffices. Lorrie prods himself to move forward, if ever so slowly, for stasis, such as that embodied by Aunt Estine, means psychic death. Always a moving target, Lorrie knows that both his sense of self and his ability to love will die if he ceases moving toward his ideals of what both can be.

For Lorrie, conforming to social expectations by acting macho or by dating girls is never a question. Rather, his problem is whether he should indulge his desire to be with Rakeem. In Lorrie's view, his love for Rakeem can coexist with his other dreams and desires. □I could welcome him into my world if he wanted me to,□ Lorrie thinks. □Hey, wasn't there enough room for him and me and the words?□ Words from his vocabulary list such as □independence□ and □soliloquy,□ which he learns at his mother's bidding, encapsulate Lorrie's attempt to become an individual in spite of his family's and his community's assumptions about him. Before long, Lorrie no longer needs to remind

himself of his goal, for he has already decided his fate: □I look at the words and suddenly I know I will know them without studying,□ he says. The words exist within him. He embodies their meaning; therefore, he is able to act upon his desires, yet he knows that he will also return home. He will not repudiate his family or the values his mother has instilled in him, all of which have brought him to this profound moment of realization□this epiphany□that makes him announce, clearly and unequivocally, his intention to see Rakeem.

Ferrell's □Proper Library□ reveals the ways in which social expectations mold the members of a community through established ideas regarding education, relationships, and identity. However, Lorrie, the story's hero, defies these expectations to create his own destiny and, with it, a proper life.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on □Proper Library,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the spread of AIDS in the black community. What percentage of AIDS cases among African Americans is spread by male-to-male sexual contact? Heterosexual contact? Intravenous drug use? Now compare these percentages to those in the overall population. Make a chart showing the results. What conclusion about the spread of this disease does your chart suggest?

Define the vocabulary words that Lorrie studies in the story: independence, chagrin, symbolism, nomenclature, filament, apocrypha, soliloquy, disenfranchise, catechism. Which of these words might have special significance to Lorrie, given the challenges he faces day to day? After each definition, write what that word might mean to Lorrie.

Think about a sequel to this story, showing Lorrie in the future. What do you think will happen to Lorrie as an adult? Will he make it to college? If yes, what career do you think he might pursue? Write a day in the life of Lorrie, ten years after this story occurs.

Research the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in the United States. How is this similar to the civil rights movement? Make a timeline of both movements, including important events and legislation, and write a paragraph pointing out differences and similarities between the two.

Compare and Contrast

Early 1990s: In 1990, there are 223 pregnancies for every 1000 black teenage girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. This is nearly twice the rate for the overall population; the overall teen pregnancy rate is 116 pregnancies for every 1000 teenage girls.

2000s: By 2000, teen pregnancies have declined significantly both in the African American and overall populations. The teen pregnancy rate for black teens, however, continues to be significantly higher. In 2000, there are 153 pregnancies for every 1000 teenage black girls aged fifteen to nineteen; the rate for the overall population of teen girls is 83 pregnancies per 1000.

Early 1990s: Both the number of new cases of AIDS diagnosed and the number of deaths from AIDS peak in the United States in 1993, the year this story is first published. There are nearly 80,000 new cases of AIDS reported in 1993, and over 40,000 deaths.

2000s: Greater awareness of the precautions necessary to prevent AIDS significantly reduces the number of new diagnoses. After about 1998, the number of new cases reported remains at around 40,000. After 2000, the number of reported deaths remains at around 18,000 per year. Unfortunately, in the black community, there is not as much improvement. In 2003 half of all the people diagnosed with new cases of HIV or AIDS are black.

Early 1990s: In 1994, some 25 percent of white households with children are single-parent households. In the black community, 65 percent of households with children are single-parent households.

2000s: The percentage of black children living with married parents makes a significant increase between 1995 and 2000, from 35 to 39 percent. This rate is the highest percentage in decades, which some experts attribute to resurgence in the popularity of marriage in the black community.

Early 1990s: In 1992, among whites aged sixteen to twenty-four, some 7.9 percent are high school dropouts. Among blacks in the same age group, about 13.6 percent drop out of school. Hispanics have the highest rate at 27.5 percent. Over one third of the black female dropouts cite pregnancy as their reason for dropping out (about one fourth of white female respondents cite pregnancy as the reason for leaving school).

2000s: In 2001, the dropout rate for whites aged sixteen to twenty-four drops slightly to 7.3 percent; black students make a more significant improvement, reducing their dropout rate to 10.9 percent. Hispanics make the least improvement; the dropout rate among Hispanics aged sixteen to twenty-four in 2001 is 27 percent, attributable in part to difficulties with the English language. Part of the reduction in dropout rates may be due to the drop in the teen pregnancy rate.

What Do I Read Next?

□Proper Library□ appears in Ferrell's award-winning collection of short stories entitled *Don't Erase Me* (1997). Most of the stories in the collection portray the lives of poor back girls and women; the title story tells of a young woman whose stepfather has infected her with the HIV virus.

Streetlights: Illuminating Tales of the Urban Black Experience (1996) is a short story collection that includes both a story from Carolyn Ferrell and one from her late mentor, journalist Doris Jean Austin.

Doris Jean Austin's *After the Garden* (1988) follows the lives of a black family living in New Jersey in the 1940s and 1950s. Austin was known primarily as a journalist, and this novel was her fiction debut.

Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers (2000) includes Ferrell's story □Can You Say My Name?□ as well as stories by noted authors Edwidge Danticat, Danzy Senna, and Randall Kenan.

Further Study

Anderson, Elijah, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, Norton, 2000.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson details how crime in the inner city stems from a complex set of social mores or codes, which are ultimately self-defeating for the individuals who live by them.

Boykin, Keith, *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*, Doubleday, 1996.

Boykin, a gay black man who served as a special media assistant to President Clinton from 1993 to 1994 and as a liaison with both the homosexual and African American communities, examines the interactions between the black gay community and the white gay and black straight communities. He examines issues such as the black community's failure to address AIDS-related problems and discrimination within the gay community.

Cohen, Cathy, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Cohen explores why AIDS has been a neglected issue in the black community and why traditional black leaders have remained silent about the disease.

Williams, Rhonda Y., *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Through dozens of interviews, Williams creates an intimate portrait of poor black women in urban America, challenging the stereotypes and labels with these women's real life experiences.

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BOOKRAGS

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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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