

# Ray Short Guide

## Ray by Barry Hannah

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Ray Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>



# Characters

The novel is filtered through the consciousness of Ray who, by the time he tells this story, has landed in the hospital. Ray's imagination sweeps across time and place. After describing his role in the Confederate army, Ray says, "I live in so many centuries. Everybody is still alive." His imagination is both the probable reason for Ray's madness (if it is madness) and great solace to him. Death is a reality that Ray, as a doctor, a lover, a veteran, and a man, cannot simply accept. The deaths of those closest to him — his Navy buddies killed in Vietnam and Sister Hooch — are losses Ray tries to overcome by viewing the past as simultaneous with the present.

There is much about Ray that is admirable, but his heroism is hardly unequivocal. Ray is an unlikely combination of weakness and strength, prejudice and tolerance, infidelity and loyalty. But these contradictions seldom trouble Ray. As he tells a class studying American Civilization: "Americans have never been consistent. They represent gentleness and rage together . . . .

One lesson we as Americans must learn is to get used to the contrarities in our hearts and learn to live with them."

Ray is a man who insists upon living life to the fullest. He crusades against a world prettified by convention and restraint. Struggling to discover where existence is most alive, he excludes little from his experience. He savors an afternoon of fishing with his son without impatience. He loves his wife yet frolics in his extramarital romps with Sister Hooch. Ray wants to make people, including himself, happy; and he is willing to try virtually any strategy to accomplish that objective.



## Social Concerns

The title character in Ray despises the smug, tidy view of life. When a "big innocent-faced frat boy in an Izod shirt" nearly kills a wino for loitering in a park, Ray beats up the boy and then heals both wino and frat boy.

Implicit, of course, is Hannah's sympathy for the wino and disdain for the frat boy.

Hannah's social consciousness is never didactic or dogmatic. Many of his characters are completely candid portraits of Southern types. If one of his characters would use a racial epithet like "nigger" or "gook," Hannah has him use it.

As seen through Ray's eyes, the contemporary South is a world of unpredictable violence, as epitomized by a Baptist minister's murdering Sister Hooch. Ray knows that many people are condemned to what he calls "CM — Constant Misery." These are the people towards whom Ray is most caring and compassionate.

Ray reserves his hatred only for those, like the murderous frat boy or the idle rich who hire him to fly their Lear jets, who deny or ignore their common humanity. As he says, "We're all God's creatures, but some of us can be especially ugly."

# Techniques

Ray is narrated in both the first and third person by the title character. This narrative strategy brings together the past and the present, the Civil War and the Vietnam War, the Old South and the New. By relating events in both the third and first person, the ambiguity of Ray's consciousness is accessible to the reader. He lives both in the present and the past, among the living and with the dead.

The novel itself is as fragmented as Ray's imagination. There are frequent leaps in time (from the present back to the Civil War or the Vietnam War), disorienting shifts from the first to the third person (sometimes even in the same sentence), and bizarre developments throughout the novel. All of these techniques, however, reflect Ray's perception of life.



# Themes

Ray is punctuated by death and loss.

One of the central episodes in *Ray* stands as a virtual paradigm for the entire novel. Sister Hooch, a daughter of an impoverished couple and passionate lover of Ray himself, struggles to achieve fame through her singing.

But almost as soon as she finally has her hit record and earns for herself some ease, the local Baptist minister kills her. Death is close at hand, familiar, unexpected, inevitable.

Ray lives in constant awareness and defiance of death. Life for him is a commercial airliner about to crash; it falls to Ray to take the controls, order another double vodka, and safely crash-land. Ray's lust for life — for sex, pleasure, and happiness — affirms life and, at least momentarily, cheats death.

To Ray, death and "Constant Misery" are as much a part of the human reality as life and happiness. He does virtually anything he can to relieve suffering and unhappiness. He gladly supplies the Hooches with the morphine and Valium that ease their pain.

Sex, like laughter, is clearly a restorative in Ray. After a bout with depression and hatred, Ray says, "Then I met Sister [Hooch] and my trust came back, my body was flooded with hope."

Later, sex and laughter are what Ray prescribes to cure others of despair as well.

## Literary Precedents

Hannah's penchant for exaggerated and sometimes grotesque characters coupled with his identity as a Southern writer have lead to almost inevitable comparisons with Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. Ray, for instance, observes that "This was a friendly city, Tuscaloosa, though there were sirens to be heard most parts of the day and the state asylum across the way was full." Hannah's fiction, however, is distinctly contemporary; he writes of the New South, even though the past, including the distant historical past, weighs heavily upon his characters.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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