

Reinhart's Women Short Guide

Reinhart's Women by Thomas Berger

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Characters/Techniques

Berger employs a very restrained style and narrative mode for Reinhart's *Women*, as though making a deliberate effort to avoid the more imaginative gambles of Arthur Rex (1978) and *Neighbors* (1980). The novel returns to the more realistic comedy of manners tradition that influenced Berger's first Reinhart novels, although there are moments that seem to be pure farce, in the mode of *Neighbors* and *The Feud* (1983), the book that immediately followed Reinhart's *Women*.

Berger's style is an urbane and mature instrument in Reinhart's *Women*, perfectly suited to the point of view of the mellow and gentlemanly Reinhart, whose consciousness dominates the story. At times, Berger's command of language and superb aesthetic control seem to be embodied in wise aphorisms such as "Fortunately he had lived long enough to know that the best defense against any moral outrage is patience" In many respects, the novel shows Berger's verbal art at its most refined, like the fine white wines Reinhart uses in his culinary achievements.

The novel also excels among Berger's books for the depth and subtlety of its characterizations: Among the women characters, Reinhart's daughter, Winona, his daughter-in-law, Mercer, his ex-wife, Genevieve, and his lady friend, Helen, are all effectively sketched. There are also some sharply etched males, usually treated more satirically: among them, Reinhart's son, Blaine, once a strident hippie, but now a prosperous and conservative lawyer; Brother Valentine, an evangelical black, and the son of Reinhart's old friend Splendor Mainwaring; and Jack Buxton, a has-been actor, are all deftly limned comic portraits. But the most impressive characterization is that of Reinhart himself, who has been transformed by age and adversity from a disenchanting and frenetic old-line liberal to a mellow and Horatian sage.

It is not surprising that the women he encounters find the gentlemanly Reinhart a reassuring presence.



Social Concerns/Themes

Berger's Reinhart series began with Berger's first novel, and its composition has continued for nearly twentyfive years, with the possibility of further additions ahead. The saga provides comic portraits of American society over a period of more than three decades, beginning with the first two Reinhart novels, which deal with Carlo Reinhart's experiences in postwar Berlin and in the ebullient America of 1946-1947. *Vital Parts* (1970), the third book in the series, presents a satirical picture of middle-aged and overweight Reinhart beleaguered by the social changes of the late 1960s, although the 1960s counterculture was the object of some of Berger's satire. In all the Reinhart novels, the hero is essentially good-natured and kind-hearted, despite some occasional forays into roguery and trickery. Reinhart's heroes are King Arthur's knight errants — whom Berger celebrated in *Arthur Rex* — and his own efforts to help others are often hopelessly quixotic.

In Reinhart's *Women*, many of the situations of *Vital Parts* are reversed.

Whereas Reinhart was treated contemptuously by his son and his wife in *Vital Parts*, in a time of social instability, he is now living serenely with his daughter in a quieter era. An economic failure in *Vital Parts*, Reinhart becomes something of a celebrity and an economic success in *Reinhart's Women* by becoming a gourmet chef on a local television station. As a sensitive and resigned middle-aged man, he is irresistibly attractive to all sorts of women who in the earlier novel would have scorned him. Even his ex-wife, who had brutally ejected him from their marriage a decade earlier, now makes a brief effort to win him back (at which "he thrilled with horror," Berger writes). Such reversals of fortune suggest the unpredictability of modern American life, as well as the uncertainty of existence.

The most interesting theme of the novel is Reinhart's compassionate response to the many women he encounters, all of whom seem to be suffering from psychic wounds inflicted by the savage 1970s. Reinhart's daughter, Winona, with whom he lives, has become a fashion model who fears men because of her violation at sixteen by a child molester. Now in her twenties, she shocks Reinhart by revealing her choice of lesbianism. Even more shocking to Reinhart, his daughter-in-law, Mercer, comes to him for sanctuary from her troubled marriage with his son. Even his ex-wife surprises him by returning humbly after business setbacks in Chicago, and a genial divorcee of forty, Helen Clayton, sees Reinhart as an agreeable lover.

In his compassionate portrayal of these emotionally vulnerable women, Berger matches the success of his earlier retelling of the Arthurian saga, *Arthur Rex*, which is notable for its understanding portraits of its women, especially Guinevere, Isolde, and Morgan Le Fay. Consequently, *Reinhart's Women*, along with *Arthur Rex*, helps to compensate for Berger's failure to deal very satisfactorily with the concerns of the feminist movement in *Regiment of Women* (1973), a decade earlier.



Key Questions

Although Reinhart's *Women* is one of a series of novels about Carlo Reinhart at different stages of his life, it can easily be read as an independent novel.

One of the major features of interest in the novel is the changing nature of sexual relationships between men and women in the late twentieth century.

Another area for discussion would be comparisons between this novel and the similar series of novels about Rabbit Angstrom by John Updike. Some critics have also invoked parallels and contrasts between Berger's fiction and Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels.

1. Is Reinhart's *Women* focused strongly on its female characters, or is the novel's chief interest the point of view of Carlo Reinhart?

2. Is Reinhart a sympathetic character to the reader? If so, what qualities make him attractive? What qualities make Reinhart attractive to the women he meets?

3. What is the result of Reinhart's encounter with his ex-wife, Genevieve?

Does Reinhart gain a sense of vindication, or is he humiliated by Genevieve's response to his rejection? Is Genevieve portrayed fairly or not? Can we feel sympathy for her, despite her apparently vindictive behavior?

4. What is the relationship between Reinhart and his daughter? How has this relationship shaped Reinhart's attitude toward other women?

5. Reinhart eventually finds a prosperous living as a chef on a cable television channel. What factors have led to Reinhart's success as a chef? How does Reinhart's new vocation add to his attractiveness as an available middle-aged man?

6. If you have read *The Bridges of Madison County*, you may wish to compare that novel's treatment of middleaged romance with Berger's treatment in Reinhart's *Women*. Which novel is more realistic in its treatment of the theme?

7. Discuss the type of comic incidents Berger creates in *Reinhart's Women*. Is the comedy created more by character, or by situation? Does Berger employ slapstick incidents, as in some of his other novels, or is the author's tone more one of wry and rueful humor at the foibles of human character?

8. Other Berger novels focus on the bad manners and incivility of American society in the late twentieth century. Is this a social problem which is also depicted in Reinhart's *Women*?

What examples of rudeness and inconsiderate behavior does the novel describe?

Literary Precedents

The Reinhart series follows loosely in the tradition of nineteenth century social realists, like Anthony Trollope and Henry James, who chronicled the social changes of several decades. A more obvious precedent in American literature is the fiction of Ernest Hemingway, particularly the Nick Adams stories, and another may be the extensive folk saga of William Faulkner, which sometimes traces the changes in a character in differing eras. The fiction of Berger's contemporaries and near contemporaries like Saul Bellow and John Updike also provides either precedents or parallels. Updike has been describing the progress of his middle class hero, Rabbit Angstrom, over a period of three decades in novels that seem to have appeared almost concurrently with Berger's Reinhart series.



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