The Rememberer Study Guide

The Rememberer by Aimee Bender

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Aimee Bender's unusual short story, "The Rememberer," was first published in the *Missouri Review* in the fall of 1997. In 1998, Bender included the story in her debut collection, entitled *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*. Most of the stories in the collection have a surreal, fairy-tale quality, and several feature bizarre physical transformations (in one story, for example, a woman gives birth to her own mother, and her husband wakes up to find a hole in his stomach "the size of a soccer ball").

"The Rememberer" tells the story of a woman whose lover, overnight, begins to evolve in reverse, from a man to an ape and then to a sea turtle. Though the situation is bizarre, it is placed in a realistic setting; the characters have an unremarkable relationship, ordinary jobs, and a normal home. This juxtaposition of the ordinary and the bizarre is a hallmark of magical realism, a modern literary genre used by authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and Angela Carter. Though the events are not based on reality, the themes explored are relevant to the real world; for those who care for frail elderly parents or spouses with Alzheimer's disease, the story of a woman watching a loved one regress into mindlessness strikes a familiar emotional chord. Bender also examines the idea that as people become more and more cerebral, they lose the ability to feel emotion and become detached from the actual experience of their lives.

The Girl in the Flammable Skirt was well-received by critics, who praised Bender for both her wild imagination and insight into human emotions. Bender followed the collection with her first novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*.

Author Biography

Aimee Bender was born in Los Angeles, California, on June 28, 1969. The youngest of three girls, Bender idolized her older sisters and often tagged along after them. Bender's father, a psychiatrist, and her mother, a choreographer, were early influences; in an interview with *pif* magazine, Bender said, "My dad, through psychiatry, is dealing with the unconscious . . . and my mom is delving into her own unconscious to make up dances. . . . And I'm sort of the combo platter, in that psychiatry is so essentially verbal . . . and also I am like her in that it's all about creating from this inexplicable mysterious place." Another early influence was the book *Transformations* by Anne Sexton, a volume of rewritten fairy tales, which Bender read as a teenager. "Only later, in rereading it, did I see how hugely it had influenced my own stuff," she said in a 2006 interview with the *Yalobusha Review*.

Bender received her undergraduate degree from the University of California at San Diego, then went on to get her Master of Fine Arts from the University of California at Irvine. While at UCI she studied with Judith Grossman and Geoffrey Wolff. Soon Bender's stories were being published in literary reviews such as the *Threepenny Review*, *Granta*, and *Story*, and in 1998, her first collection of stories, titled *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, was published ("The Rememberer" is included in this collection). Her debut was very successful; the book was chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1998 and spent seven weeks on the *Los Angeles Times* bestseller list.

After this first collection, Bender took on a new challenge: her first novel. In 2000, Doubleday published *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, the story of a young second-grade math teacher dealing with anxiety and depression. Then in 2005, Bender returned to the short story with her second collection, *Willful Creatures*.

In addition to writing, Bender has taught writing at several universities. As of 2006, she was teaching full time at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Plot Summary

As “The Rememberer” opens, the female narrator informs readers that her lover is “experiencing reverse evolution.” A sentence later it becomes clear that she does not mean this in a figurative sense; her lover, Ben, turned first into an ape, and now, a month later, he is a sea turtle.

After this startling introduction, Annie, the narrator, explains that she has determined Ben is “shedding a million years a day.” His office has called asking where he is, and Annie told them he was sick. She keeps Ben, the sea turtle, in a baking pan full of water; each day when she returns home, he has regressed into a more primitive form.

Annie describes the day he first began his backwards journey; Ben had been lamenting, in his sad way, that people think too much. “Our brains are getting bigger and bigger, and the world dries up and dies when there’s too much thought and not enough heart.” Annie and Ben made love, and to reassure him, Annie whispered in his ear, “See, we’re not thinking.” Afterwards, they went outside to the patio. Ben said he wanted to sleep outside, so Annie left him there and went to bed by herself. When she woke up the next morning, she looked outside and Ben the man was gone; in his place, a large ape lay on the patio.

At first Annie handled the situation calmly, thinking Ben would eventually return to normal. Now, however, she has realized this may not happen.

Now Annie returns home from work and Ben, in his baking pan, has become a small salamander. Seeing this, she realizes, “This is the limit of my limits . . . I cannot bear to look down into the water and not be able to find him at all.” So she takes the pan, with Ben inside, to the beach, where she sets it afloat on the water and waves goodbye.

Now she waits, wondering if Ben will ever return as a man. She makes sure all her memories of him are still vivid, “because if he’s not here, then it is my job to remember.”

Characters

Annie

Annie is the female narrator of the story. Ben, her lover, laments that he and Annie "think far too much." There is ample evidence throughout the story that Annie, indeed, thinks too much. For example, when Annie describes the first time she and Ben had sex, she says that she "concentrated really hard on letting go," a sort of emotional oxymoron. Also, the fact that she consults a teacher at the community college to determine the rate of Ben's backward progress indicates her intellectual, rather than emotional orientation.

There is evidence too that Annie is aware of the way she overthinks life and is trying to change. At one point, Ben takes her outside, shows her the stars, and tells her, *"There is no space for anything but dreaming*." She goes back to bed but cannot sleep and ends up outside again, trying hard to dream, as Ben suggested, but she is not sure how.

Though she over intellectualizes, Annie is not a cold or unsympathetic character. Her love for Ben is real, and she expresses many tender sentiments about him. Even when Ben becomes an ape, Annie says, "I didn't miss human Ben right away; I wanted to meet the ape, too, to take care of my lover like a son, a pet; I wanted to know him every possible way."

Ben

Ben, Annie's lover, is "always sad about the world." This is probably because Ben, like Annie, thinks too much. In fact, rather than just being sad and experiencing that emotion, Annie says that she and Ben would "sit together and be sad and think about being sad and sometimes discuss sadness." After he becomes an ape, the bookstore calls to tell him that his "out-of-print special-ordered book on civilization" is ready to be picked up, indicating that even though Ben knew he and Annie were thinking too much, he was unable to stop. The night before he begins his regression, he tells Annie that he hates talking, and he wants to communicate with her just by looking into her eyes. Finally, it seems the only way Ben can stop thinking so much is to actually de-evolve, to stop being human.

Bender makes an interesting choice in naming this character: Ben becomes what has been before, what humans were before they were human.

Themes

The Burden of Caregiving

The gradual regression of Ben from human to salamander is analogous to the progressive decline of an Alzheimer's patient. Caring for the frail elderly or any loved one with an injury or progressive disease that deteriorates cognitive ability places enormous stress on the caregiver. Like Annie, caregivers feel the need to become the rememberer, both in a sentimental sense (being sure to retain the patient's life memories and recall the person's original personality) and also in a practical sense (taking over the paying of bills, scheduling appointments, remembering when medication must be taken, etc.). The reader gets the feeling that, unlike someone suffering with dementia or Alzheimer's, Ben has made a conscious decision to give up thinking, thus burdening Annie with the responsibility of thinking for both of them. Near the beginning of the story, Annie asks Ben, the sea turtle, "Ben . . . can you understand me?" Close to the end (when Ben is a salamander), she asks again, "Ben . . . do you remember me? Do you remember?" Of course, she gets no answer, and once again the burden of decision-making is hers. The stress of the burden is evident in this passage: "Now I come home from work and look for his regular-size shape walking and worrying and realize, over and over, that he's gone. I pace the halls. I chew whole packs of gum in mere minutes." Finally, Annie reaches "the limit of [her] limits" and decides to let Ben go, releasing him into the ocean, just as many caregivers must make the final decision to cease life-prolonging procedures (such as intravenous feeding and other life-support mechanisms) and let nature take its course. In Bender's scenario, the caregiver suffers more than the actual patient, and her final decision is born of her own desire to avoid more suffering: "I cannot bear to look down into the water," she says, "and not be able to find him at all." Ben, who is no longer burdened by thought, is now at peace; Annie is the afflicted one. Bender poignantly illustrates the emotional strain of being the rememberer.

The Dangers of Intellectualism

Ben tells Annie that they both think too much, "and the world dries up and dies when there's too much thought and not enough heart." This is an interesting choice of words by Bender, because as Ben devolves, he progresses from a land mammal (an ape) to an aquatic creature (a sea turtle and then a salamander). Apparently he has reversed the drying up process, by eliminating thought.

Later in the story readers learn that before becoming an ape, Ben had ordered a book on civilization from the bookstore. Perhaps Ben was interested in the evolution of civilization, in which the focus of society shifted gradually from religion and towards science, explaining away the mysteries of the stars and planets and other natural phenomena. The shift away from religion and towards science placed more emphasis on rational thought and less on superstition and intuition. While this is generally

considered positive, many people (like Ben) feel that it has also insulated people from their own emotions. Ben is craving life on an intuitive, instinctive level, away from thought; he takes Annie outside under the stars and tells her, "*Look, Annie, look—there is no space for anything but dreaming*."

The popularity of meditation, in which one attempts to gradually leave the busy thoughts of the mind behind and simply exist in the moment, indicates that Ben is not alone in his desire. Ben's difficulties raise an intriguing question: though people normally consider the increasing sophistication of the human brain as evolutionary progress, is there a point at which it becomes counterproductive? Has an increase of intellect led to similar emotional progress, or has emotional evolution lagged behind? Some might consider the continued proliferation of war and crime evidence that humans have evolved less on an emotional level than intellectually. Bender's story illustrates the struggle to find a balance between emotion and thought. Ben, in his desire to abandon thought, regresses in all areas, until he becomes a less complex form of life (a salamander) and is still continuing to regress. Most people would prefer a middle ground; one could say that humans must learn to be amphibious, able to exist both in the depths of their emotions and on the dry land of their intellect.

Style

Magical Realism

Bender's writing style is usually categorized as magical realism. The term is a suitable oxymoron, combining two contradictory ideas because that is what happens in this style. Magical realism refers to the practice of placing bizarre, surreal events in a realistic context, and treating the unrealistic events as real. Certainly the premise of a human undergoing reverse evolution from a man to a salamander is not realistic, but Bender places these events in the context of an ordinary life. Co-workers call and wonder where Ben is, a book he ordered at the bookstore goes unclaimed, Annie continues working and coming home each day to a smaller and more primitive Ben. When Ben turns into a sea turtle, she keeps him in an ordinary glass baking dish on her kitchen counter. These pedestrian details ground the story for readers, allowing them to imagine themselves in a situation far beyond the realm of reality.

The use of the present tense also makes the story more real and immediate. Annie relates the story as it is happening. Because it unfolds in the present tense, she cannot be imagining these events or embellishing on something that occurred in the distant past.

Point of View

Because "The Rememberer" is written in the first person, from the point of view of Annie, the reader has access to the thoughts and emotions brought on by Ben's bizarre regression, yet not to the possible explanations that Ben himself could provide. There are clues that this reverse evolution is something that Ben actually desired and wished for, but like Annie, readers cannot be sure, since by the time the story begins, Ben is no longer able to communicate verbally. Annie must decide, without Ben's help, how much of the Ben she knew is actually left. The first-person viewpoint allows readers to experience Annie's uncertainty and bewilderment in making this decision.

Humor

Bender skillfully uses humor throughout the story, enough to entertain, but not so much that the reader suspects the whole premise is a joke. After Ben becomes an ape, Annie sits with him on the patio, stroking his hand. When he reaches out to her, Annie's reaction is both realistic and funny: "I said No, loudly, and he seemed to understand and pulled back. I have limits here." As Annie fields calls from coworkers, "Ben, the baboon, sat in a corner by the window, wrapped up in drapery, chattering to himself." For the most part, the sheer absurdity of the story's premise provides its own humor. In the first paragraph, Annie explains, "One day he was my lover and the next he was some kind of ape. It's been a month and now he's a sea turtle." Though the overall tone of the story is bittersweet and melancholy—it is essentially a story of loss—Bender tells readers that

few situations in life are without humor, even those that cause grief. Then, too, these scenes lend themselves to psychological readings. Readers might see parallels to a kind of relationship that deteriorates apace with one partner's quick changes in behavior or might see analogies to those situations in which one partner is on the phone trying to explain the other partner's silence or withdrawal to the partner's coworkers or boss.

Flashback

When the story begins, Annie's situation with Ben has already reached a crisis point (he is a sea turtle); Annie informs readers through a series of flashbacks, starting with more recent events, and eventually working her way back to the beginning of Ben's regression, and then further back to a brief history of their relationship. Once readers have the full story of her dilemma, Annie returns to the present, in the thick of her emotional debate: when should she give up and let Ben go? By the time Annie returns to the present tense, readers are fully vested in the story, and the decision she makes carries more emotional weight.

Historical Context

Aging of the United States Population

The generation known as baby boomers is usually defined as those individuals born between 1945 (the end of World War II) and 1964. In 1997, when “The Rememberer” was first published, older baby boomers had reached middle age, and many had become caregivers for their aging parents. Soon baby boomers got a second nickname: the sandwich generation. Caregivers—usually women—were sandwiched between caring for their own children and caring for their aging parents. The stress of this double burden was compounded by the grief of watching a parent deteriorate physically and often mentally. It is common for the care of the parent to fall to one family member while others, unwilling to witness their parent’s decline, stay away. Though Annie is caring for her lover, not a parent, the stresses are essentially the same. In her character readers see both situations at once: she has the stress and anxiety of being the sole caregiver but also the desire to avoid witnessing Ben’s regression. She realizes she cannot stand to watch him completely de-evolve into a “one-celled wonder, bloated and bordered, brainless, benign, heading clear and small like an eye-floater into nothingness.” So for the sandwich generation, as adults watch their own children evolve into adults, they often face the hardship of witnessing their parents diminish into the aged equivalent of uncertain and frightened dependent toddlers.

Scientific Breakthroughs

It is no wonder Ben and Annie think too much; the late 1990s presented everyone with plenty to ponder. In February 1997, scientists in Edinburgh, Scotland, announced that they had successfully cloned a female sheep, which they named Dolly. This event immediately gave rise to heated debates over the ethical and moral issues involved in the eventual cloning of human beings. A year earlier, in 1996, analysis of a Mars meteorite found in Antarctica revealed some evidence of life on the planet, including fossil-like depressions and organic compounds usually created by bacteria. In July 1997, NASA’s Mars Pathfinder actually landed on the surface of Mars and sent back hundreds of pictures of the red planet.

Bender makes references to science in the story; one of her first actions after Ben begins his backward journey is to contact a biology professor for an evolutionary timeline. She anticipates Ben’s eventually becoming a “one-celled wonder” that she will need a microscope to find. Ben also laments that “our brains are getting bigger and bigger,” and as the story ends, Annie feels her skull “to see if it’s growing.” These scientific breakthroughs, the ideas they suggest, and the questions they pose seem to stretch people’s sense of what the individual is, how the individual is created, and what the limits of life might be beyond what was formerly believed.

Critical Overview

Critical reception to Bender's first short story collection, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (which includes "The Rememberer") was very positive: The *New York Times* selected it as a Notable Book of 1998, and the *Los Angeles Times* named it one of the best works of fiction for that year as well. A reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* calls the collection "a string of jewels," and Fiona Luis of the *Boston Globe* writes, "Each short story packs quite a hefty punch, and each should be savored." Several reviewers single out "The Rememberer" for praise, including Margot Mifflin of *Entertainment Weekly*, who writes that Bender's "account of a woman whose lover evolves backward [is] superbly imagined."

More than one reviewer praises Bender's ability to combine her bizarre and sometimes comic story lines with genuine, deeply felt emotion. This ability is evident in "The Rememberer"; Luis writes, "This bizarrely comic tale would be rib-splittingly funny save for the simple fact that Bender breaks your heart." Praising this same skill in the collection as a whole, the reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* writes: "While full of funny moments, these tales are neither slight nor glib. They recognize that to be human is to be immensely fragile, and their characters are always unmistakably human."

Some reviewers feel that while the debut is impressive, Bender's relative inexperience as a writer sometimes shows. Mifflin writes, "Some of Bender's forays into magical realism feel like collegiate exercises," and Lisa Zeidner of the *New York Times Book Review* agrees: "The weakest [stories] juxtapose multiple plot lines—a standard creative-writing workshop ploy—without much more point than to showcase the skill of the juggler." Both Mifflin's and Zeidner's overall reviews of the collection, however, are positive.

Many reviewers praise Bender's singular style; the reviewer from *Publishers Weekly* writes, "Bender's is a unique and compassionate voice," and Christina Schwarz, in an *Atlantic Monthly* review of Bender's later collection, *Willful Creatures*, says that Bender's prose is "so animated it seems almost capable of writing itself," and is "just plain fun to read." Overall, the consensus seems to be that Bender's talent as a writer is evident in these stories and that she has the potential to become even more skilled in the future.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Michigan and over twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In the following essay, she compares the transformation of Ben in "The Rememberer" to that of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."

Aimee Bender's story "The Rememberer" centers on the transformation of the narrator's lover from a man to an assortment of animals, as he de-evolves. Arguably the most famous story of such a transformation is Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," in which the main character, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning to discover that he has become a huge insect. Though Bender's and Kafka's writing styles are drastically different, the two stories share thematic similarities beyond the metamorphosis of man to beast.

In both stories, the metamorphosis places a significant amount of stress on the transformer's loved ones.

In "The Rememberer," Bender implies, through flashbacks to earlier conversations with Ben, that his transformation was not an entirely unwelcome event, but rather something desired. Though Gregor Samsa probably did not wish, specifically, to become an insect, the transformation brings him some obvious benefits, too. Gregor despises his job, so much so that his hatred of it supersedes even his horror at becoming a giant bug; even after making the discovery that he has transformed, his thoughts immediately turn back to his job: "Oh God . . . what a grueling job I've picked! Day in, day out—on the road." Once he becomes an insect, he can no longer continue his job as a traveling salesman. He has escaped.

Ben seeks to escape not his job, but the tyranny of his own intellect. He tells Annie, the narrator, "We think far too much." Since Ben is a man of conscience, his thinking extends beyond himself to the woes of the world. Annie says, "He was always sad about the world." In his transformation, Ben seeks to escape the burden he has taken on, the troubles of the entire planet. Gregor Samsa's burdens are closer to home; he supports his parents and his teenage sister, and in addition, he is paying off a debt his parents owe his employer. He thinks to himself, "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago." He imagines leaving his job once he pays off the debt, but since "that will probably take another five or six years," Gregor's immediate future looks pretty bleak. Interestingly, after their transformations, both men are contacted first by their employers, demanding to know where they are. Gregor's manager barely allows him an hour's grace before he actually arrives at the Samsas' house, at 7:15 a.m., berating him. Annie fields calls from Ben's office: "Why wasn't he at work? Why did he miss his lunch date with those clients?" Once the employers find out the men cannot work (Gregor's boss actually sees him in his insect state, whereas Annie tells Ben's

office that he is suffering from a “strange sickness”), they never contact them again. Implied is the idea that men, in contemporary society, are still valued mainly for their ability to be productive, to make a contribution; once they lose this ability, they are abandoned.

In both stories, the metamorphosis places a significant amount of stress on the transformer’s loved ones. Annie feels the need to pick up thinking where Ben left off: “I review my memories and make sure they’re still intact because if he’s not here, then it’s my job to remember.” Gregor’s family is not only horrified at his new form, they are also left without income, and his father, mother, and sister must all seek employment to compensate. Annie’s reaction to Ben’s situation is a deep sadness; she reviews poignant memories of their time together and searches for explanations. Gregor’s family reacts at first with horror, then grief, but eventually they come to resent Gregor’s abandonment of them and the burden he has thus placed upon them. In one scene, when Gregor leaves the confines of his room, his father pelts him with apples; one lodges in his flesh and remains there, festering, for over a month. Only his sister treats him with kindness, but she too eventually turns on him. This is ironic, since it is likely that Gregor’s resentment of the burden his family placed upon him is what caused the transformation in the first place.

Because “The Metamorphosis” is written from the viewpoint of the character who transforms, the reader knows Gregor is still capable of intelligent thought and human emotion. Since “The Rememberer” is told from Annie’s point of view, not Ben’s, there is no way of knowing if Ben is still thinking in the human sense. The logical assumption is that he is not, since thought is exactly what Ben sought to escape. Still, Annie attempts communication with him, even when he is a lowly salamander, asking “Do you remember me?” No one in the Samsa family speaks to Gregor; they all assume that because he is an insect, he can no longer understand them. This assumption leads to increasing neglect. His sister stops cleaning his room, and though at first she takes pains to find out what foods he will enjoy, later in the story, she “hurriedly shoved any old food into Gregor’s room with her foot.”

Both men are eventually abandoned. Gregor’s family does their best to ignore his existence, and his sister actually encourages Mr. and Mrs. Samsa to “try to get rid of it.” This turns out to be unnecessary, because his sister’s betrayal is the last straw for Gregor: He dies shortly afterwards. Annie’s abandonment is less harsh: She simply releases Ben into the ocean. Still, as with the Samsas, the motive behind her action is not concern for Ben, but an unwillingness to endure more grief: “I cannot bear to look down into the water and not be able to find him at all, to search the tiny clear waves with a microscope lens and to locate my lover, the one-celled wonder.”

In the end, Gregor’s family undergoes a transformation as well. Unable to continue to use Gregor as a crutch, they all become more self-sufficient. Gregor notices that his once stooped and shuffling father “was holding himself very erect . . . his usually rumpled white hair was combed flat, with a scrupulously exact, gleaming part.” His sister blossoms into a woman and gets “livelier and livelier” after Gregor’s death. Annie, by contrast, continues to wait for Ben’s return: “I make sure my phone number is listed. I

walk around the block at night in case he doesn't quite remember which house it is." Still, Annie is also changed. She has learned something about the limits of the intellect; at the end of the story, she says, "Sometimes before I put my one self to bed, I place my hands around my skull to see if it's growing, and wonder what, of any use, would fill it if it did."

Both stories can be interpreted as cautionary tales about seeking to escape the burdens of life. Both men wished to be free of the weight they carried—for Gregor, the weight of supporting his family, and for Ben, the weight of constant thought and worry. It is probably safe to assume, however, that neither wished for the specific form that their liberation took; Ben probably did not specifically wish to de-evolve into a salamander, and Gregor certainly did not yearn to be a giant insect. Their escape from their problems simply handed them a new, radically different set of hardships. In getting rid of their burdens, they also lost the people they loved. The price of freedom turned out to be far higher than Ben or Gregor could have known.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on "The Rememberer," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In the following essay, he discusses Bender's story as an example of metafiction, as a story that traces its own construction from the original moment of an idea through to a fully realized narrative complete with setting, plot, and characters.

Metafiction is a style of writing that draws attention to itself in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, as well as delighting in the nature of its own storytelling. In Aimee Bender's "The Rememberer," metafiction is a reflexive exercise that, like a funhouse mirror, allows readers to experience a "reverse evolution." Aligned with such important antecedents as Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (1605) and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Bender's story does more than expose the act of writing to new scrutiny. It also questions a world increasingly predisposed to ignore the mysteries shaping everyday occurrences in favor of the comforts of the known and the knowable.

Fearful that she will quest perpetually for the irretrievable story of Ben, Annie recognizes that she now sees the world with her heart and can appreciate its mystery and wonder.

Annie, the narrator of Bender's "The Rememberer," opens her own story with an amazing announcement: Her "lover," Ben, "is experiencing reverse evolution." This dramatic statement connects Annie's story to the great creation myths from Genesis through to Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Ben is recreated through a series of clearly defined, but wholly fantastic, devolutionary stages. Originally a human, he soon is reimagined as an ape, a sea turtle, and finally a salamander. As Annie points out, following her exchange with "the old biology teacher at the community college," the creative revisioning of Ben moves across time in ways that defy understanding. "He is shedding a million years a day," she calculates, despite the fact that she openly admits she is "no scientist" and prefers to see his condition as "a strange sickness." To understand Ben's relocation along the evolutionary line as anything other than a freak show or sickness demands a leap into the world of the creative imagination, which Annie is not quite ready to take.

As Annie struggles to understand Ben's condition, his importance in her life gradually reveals itself to be much more than that of a casual lover. He was the source of her inspiration and the stimulus for her own stories. Through his reverse evolution, Ben provides a primer on how to live a creative life, a how-to-guide to remembering. On the last day that she sees Ben as a human, for instance, Annie talks with him about the sadness he feels and about his view of a world increasingly dominated by intellect. To Annie and to the attentive reader, Ben's realization is profound: "Our brains are just getting bigger and bigger," he concludes, and "we think far too much." Reminding his

lover of the need to see her world with her heart and imagination rather than allowing herself to be controlled by her mind, Ben essentially counsels her to turn off reason in order to feel: “The world dries up and dies,” he warns her, “when there’s too much thought and not enough heart.”

At first, Annie admits that this new way of seeing is foreign to her. She finds it difficult not to concentrate “really hard on letting go” when she makes love with Ben, leaving their attempt at physical intimacy unconsummated in the sense of being left off “in the middle of everything.” Their interrupted lovemaking is replaced by “ an hour-long conversation about poetry.”

Annie remembers their discussion of Walt Whitman’s famous poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (1900). They go outside to contemplate dreaming under the night sky: “He woke me up in the middle of the night,” she recalls, “lifted me off the pale blue sheets, led me outside to the stars and whispered: “Look, Annie, look—there is no space for anything but dreaming.” In a moment that speaks volumes about the limitations that she has placed on her heart and imagination, Annie is forced to acknowledge that she does not yet know how “to dream up to the stars.” She says, “I tried to find a star that no one in all of history had ever wished on before and wondered what would happen if I did.”

But as the story unfolds, Ben becomes smaller and increasingly amphibian, and Annie’s heart and imagination grow larger. She imagines a world that exists beyond words, a place past metaphor. She feels more and conveys emotions with a look rather than with words. In one of her final conversations with Ben, Annie opens herself to his desire to avoid language. He would rather, he explains, “look into [her] eyes and tell [her] things that way.” Once she crosses this threshold of language and reason, Annie responds physically and connects emotionally with the quickly devolving Ben. When her lover looks into her eyes, she feels her “skin lift.” The next morning, when human Ben has morphed into an ape, Annie reacts with understanding and curiosity instead of with panic or loathing. In other words, she reacts with her heart instead of her mind. The reverse evolution continues: Annie comes home one day to find Ben is “some kind of salamander now.”

Salamanders have the ability to regenerate lost limbs: Annie can regenerate her own storytelling. Forcing herself to “review [her] memories and make sure they’re intact,” Annie becomes a storyteller who watches her own story of Ben. She is, in other words, a storyteller who experiences what she acknowledges is “the limit of [her] limits”: she looks, metaphorically, into the microscopic origins of her own inspiration. Fearful that she will quest perpetually for the irretrievable story of Ben, Annie recognizes that she now sees the world with her heart and can appreciate its mystery and wonder. Searching for Ben as both a human and a story, Annie comes to imagine the stories that circulate within “the one-celled wonder, bloated and bordered, brainless, benign, heading clear and small like an eye-floater into nothingness.”

Having returned Ben the salamander to the sea, Annie returns to her world a changed woman and a changed storyteller. Just as Ben has reverse evolved to the simpler form

of the salamander, Annie's story of Ben returns to the point where all stories must begin: in a moment of insight and in a flash of imagination. As she releases Ben at the water's edge, Annie releases herself. Annie becomes a rememberer, someone who lives life fully aware of the past.

She knows that to engage life as a writer is to live, as she observes early in the story, in "a sea of me." With Ben gone, Annie is able to become, for the first time, the "one self" that she has always hoped to be rather than a writer who is defined by other people's dreams and visions. She is free to transcend the limitations of her previous existence and to become more than "a poor soul with all the ingredients but no container" in which to store them.

In this sense, Bender's story is testament to Annie's own evolution, to her rememberings of journeys away from an imagined life that had left her trapped in reason. Ben's release occurs as Annie turns her back on the shore and waves. She returns to her car ready to begin her journey into the new world. The story ends, too, with Annie hoping that Ben might one day "wash up on shore" and comes back to her. Bender's "The Rememberer" ends with a looping back, a return to the beginning: Annie returns to the world in order that she might tell the story of a lover who, as the opening sentence announces, "is experiencing reverse evolution."

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on "The Rememberer," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• After Ben begins his reverse evolution, Annie asks a biology professor to make her an evolutionary timeline. The professor's timeline turns out to be wrong. Research theories of evolution, and using your research, create your own evolutionary timeline.

• Ben tells Annie, "We're all getting too smart. Our brains are just getting bigger and bigger." Do you agree? Write an essay explaining your position. Use factual evidence (IQ statistics, medical research, etc.) to support your opinion.

• Due to the aging of the baby boomer generation, soon more and more people will find themselves in the caretaker role that Annie assumes with Ben. Research the number of Americans over sixty years of age, and make a graph showing the increase in this age group by the year 2020, the year 2030, and the year 2040.

• "The Rememberer" begins *in medias res*, a Latin term meaning "in the middle of things." The term usually refers to a story that begins in mid-action; in this story, Ben has already regressed to the form of a sea turtle when the story begins. Write a short story that begins *in medias res*.

What Do I Read Next?

- Gabriel García Márquez is the preeminent practitioner of magical realism, the genre with which Aimee Bender's work is often associated. Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is considered to be one of his finest works.

- Angela Carter is another well-known magical realist. Bender cites "The Company of Wolves," a retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, as one of her favorite Carter stories. This story can be found in the collection, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), which includes Carter's unique take on several other fairy tales.

- Bender cites *Transformations* (1971), by poet Anne Sexton, as an early influence. Sexton retells familiar fairy tales such as Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood; Sexton's versions are dark, twisted, and sometimes humorous.

- Bender's first novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2000), tells the story of twenty-year-old Mona Gray, who teaches second-grade math. Mona has gradually withdrawn from life since her father began to suffer from an unnamed illness; in helping one of her students cope with tragedy, Mona begins to recover herself.

- *Willful Creatures*, published in 2005, is Bender's second short story collection. The stories in this collection take a darker turn than those in *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, but the plots are just as surreal, including a couple with pumpkins for heads and a man who buys a miniature man at a pet shop and keeps him in a cage.

- Bender's older sister Karen is also an author. Her debut novel, *Like Normal People*, tells the story of Ella Rose, an elderly woman, and her daughter Lena, who is retarded and living in a group home.

Further Study

Burling, Robbins, *The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

This book explores how human language came to be and examines competing linguistic theories and controversies. Burling traces the development of language from gestures and early sounds to the language of modern times.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, translated by Maria Tatar, Norton, 2004.

Critics have described Bender's stories as modern fairy tales. This collection of the Grimm brothers' original fairy tales includes their most famous tales as well as a few that were left out of many books, once the brothers realized that parents were reading the stories to children. The book includes explanatory notes on the historical and cultural origins of the stories.

Parent, Marc, ed., *The Secret Society of Demolition Writers*, Random House, 2005.

This collection of short stories by popular contemporary authors has a unique twist: the authors do not use their real names, leaving the reader to guess who wrote what. The book includes stories by Aimee Bender, Benjamin Cheever, Alice Sebold, Sebastian Junger, and many others.

Young, David, ed., *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*, Oberlin College Press, 1984.

This sizable anthology (over 500 pages) contains stories in the magical realism style from a wide variety of authors, including Tolstoy, Faulkner, Kafka, and García Márquez.

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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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