A Stone for Danny Fisher Short Guide

A Stone for Danny Fisher by Harold Robbins

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Characters

Danny Fisher IS a "jerk" in search of a picaresque adventure in which he might have been a rogue.

Danny has the reader's full sympathy throughout the novel, A Stone for Danny Fisher, because of the point of view, but by any objective standard he misses his chance again and again simply because he fails to consider his options. He agrees to throw the Golden Gloves championship fight to enable his father to start his own business again, but he fails to realize that losing the fight will end the professional boxing career that was to be his ticket out of the slums. To make matters worse, his father throws him out of the house on the night of the fight for wasting his life in pursuit of a dangerous boxing career, but it never occurs to Danny to explain that this amateur fight is to be his last. Then he allows his boxing skill to overwhelm the logic of the bad deal he has made and goes on to win the fight, leaving himself hunted for years by the gambler with whom he had made his dirty deal and a disappointment to the high school coach who had invested thousands of dollars in his potential as a fighter.

When he returns to New York, he takes no precautions to avoid his old enemies. Danny is totally lacking in introspection, and he does not change in the course of the work. This fact is not a flaw in the book's characterization but a necessary condition of the theme that fate is beyond man's control and understanding.

There are a large number of minor characters, all etched with an almost Dickensian eye for the significant characterizing detail. Nellie Petito is the good girl Danny marries. She domesticates him. She also has an irrational premonition that Danny is in danger on the day they are moving back to his childhood home. With no good reason for her fears, she nevertheless turns out to be right, for Robbins is using her to illustrate his fatalistic theme. Sarah Dorfman (professional name Ronnie) is the whore with a heart of gold who saves Danny when he fails to throw the fight and barters away her own chance for happiness to support her disabled brother. Sam Gottkin (later Gordon) is a person from this world who makes it — for a while. He is already a high school coach at the beginning of the book, but he becomes a summer entrepreneur and then a major businessman.

But he too is a product and a victim of the urban scene, and he never really adopts middle class values. As a coach, he lets, indeed requires, squabbling boys to fight out their antagonisms. He is also carrying on an adulterous affair.

And as a businessman he makes deals with gangsters on their own level and cuts what corners can be cut. Mimi, Danny's sister, sells herself into a loveless marriage with Sam as her way out of the slums.

Perhaps the most interesting characters in the book are Danny's parents, who strike the appropriate postures for lower middle class domesticity and fail to see when and how their dreams slip away from them. Danny's father is cold and rejecting and unwilling to

listen to reason, but Danny never recognizes that he has adopted the very same stereotypic male attitudes, not only when he slugs the welfare investigator but even when, especially when, he is blaming his father for the death of his dog or for the loss of their home in the paradise that is Brooklyn.

Social Concerns

When Danny returns to New York after failing to throw a fight for bookie Maxie Fields, Robbins saves him from the consequences of his earlier action quite arbitrarily. In much the same way, Robbins later kills off Danny's daughter — and with the same purpose — to show that it is an unreasoning fate that guides "life among the lowly" (as Harriet Beecher Stowe subtitled Uncle Tom's Cabin). Of course, Danny is just a teen-ager at the time of the fight and only about twenty when his daughter dies; however, Robbins's portrait of Danny's world is effective and realistic just because the character of Danny can tell the whole of his own life story without pausing for one moment of serious self-reflection. His shady dealings escalate from shoplifting, mugging, agreeing to fix a fight, and cheating the Department of Welfare to blackmail, black marketeering, and arranging to have his brother-inlaw killed by a hit man, but he never considers the moral or even the practical implications of what he is doing.

The hit goes wrong in the same way that the fixed fight does. Danny learns too late that he does not have the facts straight. This time the mistake kills him.

At another level the book illustrates lower-middle-class striving for the security and protection of a home of one's own. Danny's anger at his father begins when the family home is lost, and he finally resolves this anger on the day when he moves back into the house but can do so only because his father reaches out to him saying, "We've all come home again."

Techniques

Danny Fisher narrates his own story in the first person, but by the ingenious device of a prologue spoken by Danny from the grave to the son he never knew, Robbins is able not only to maintain the verisimilitude of a firstperson narration but even to describe plausibly incidents Danny had not witnessed in his life, for example the reactions of his mother on the morning she discovers that the milk service has been stopped for non-payment. Such passages are clearly marked with "I WASN'T THERE WHEN," making the shifts of focus easy to follow and helping to maintain overall consistency of mood.

Although Robbins is more a writer of incident than image, he can be wonderfully effective at important turning points in the story by presenting a minor detail of life in a way that suggests the whole direction of the story.

For example, when Danny's mother does learn that milk service will be discontinued, she sits down in front of the open icebox. "Whatever cold was left in it would escape," Robbins writes, "but somehow it didn't matter.

She didn't have the strength to get up and close the door. . . . She stared into the almost empty icebox until it seemed to grow larger and larger and she was lost in its half-empty, half-cold world."

To use Phyllis Bentley's terms, A Stone for Danny Fisher is almost all scene and no summary; that is to say, numerous episodes from Danny's life are presented to the reader, but there are no narrative links connecting these episodes. This technique gives a graphic urgency to the story and allows a long book to move very rapidly. The character Danny is also able to give the impression that he is neither self-centered nor self-justifying (although he is both) because he never comments on what he was doing but merely describes what he said and did. Thus the book avoids a possible sentimentality, and the technique helps the reader to focus on the theme that the evils of urban life and of the Depression have conspired to destroy what chance there might have been for happiness in the lower middle class.

Although liberally seasoned with explicit violence, A Stone for Danny Fisher stops the sex scenes just short of the graphic. In doing so in this book Robbins shows himself to be a remarkably astute judge of the threshold of reader arousal. This technique also suits the material well because Danny lives so naturally in a world of eroticism (and violence). The image of the girl next door purposely walking around naked in her bedroom to tease him is an emblem for the life he leads when he grows up — the pleasures of life are always just within sight — daring him to risk the disappointment of actually reaching for them.

A Stone for Danny Fisher is written in a racy, colloquial style, but it is written with such a sure control of the idiomatic that the father's occasional Yiddishisms seem a bit jarring; however, this fact may have increased the book's appeal by making the milieu seem only superficially and accidentally Jewish.

The problems of Danny are, after all, the problems of all working class ethnics during the Depression.

Themes

The social issue of the effect of fate on the aspirations of the lower middle class and the reciprocal concern for the security of a home are important thematic motifs in the book, but from Danny's point of the view, the theme of his life is probably "Without a buck, you're nothin' but crap." Although the novel is autobiographical, for Robbins the theme of the book as a whole is not so simple, but it is perhaps summed up in this observation of Danny's: "Someone you know all your life tries to kick your teeth in, and a man you never saw before and will never see again comes along and saves your life." Logically enough the book ends with a hymn to the "ordinary man."

Adaptations

Michael Curtis directed a movie version of A Stone for Danny Fisher called King Creole (1958). In order to tailor the material to star Elvis Presley, the locale was changed from New York to New Orleans, and the hero was made a Cajun rather than a Jew and given a talent for singing rather than boxing. Despite these major changes, the movie is faithful to the seedy atmosphere of the book and leaves many important character relationships intact. It shows an imaginative integration of the musical numbers into the dramatic story and includes what is probably Presley's best film performance. The supporting cast includes Walter Matthau, Vic Morrow, Carolyn Jones, Dean Jagger, Jan Shepherd, Paul Stewart, and Dolores Hart.

Never Love a Stranger was filmed in 1958 from a screenplay written by Robbins in collaboration with Richard Day. The director was Robert Stevens, and the movie stars John Drew Barrymore and Steve McQueen. In 1977, 79 Park Avenue was a six-hour television movie directed by Paul Wendkos. It starred Lesley Ann Warren (fatally miscast), Marc Singer, and David Dukes and featured a huge supporting cast of name players. This movie was cut to four hours for rebroadcast. Neither of these adaptations was a critical or a popular success.

Literary Precedents

A Stone for Danny Fisher is a Bildungsroman (or novel of growing up) in the picaresque tradition that goes back at least to Don Quixote (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes. More immediate ancestors include the nineteenth-century moral tales of Horatio Alger, turn-ofthe-century muckraking novels of low life like The Jungle (1906) by Upton Sinclair, and proletarian novels of the 1930s like Studs Lonigan (1932-1935) by James T. Farrell. James Lane has also suggested a specific relationship between A Stone for Danny Fisher and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1943) by Betty Smith and Knock on Any Door (1947) by Willard Motley. In particular, Smith's Francie Nolan symbolizes the aspirations of those determined to overcome the dehumanizing effects of the modern urban experience through hard work. Danny Fisher illustrates how easy it is to be destroyed by this world.

Related Titles

After he had written the three novels Never Love a Stranger (1948), A Stone for Danny Fisher, and 79 Park Avenue (1955), Robbins came to see them as forming a trilogy which he calls The Depression in Neiu York. These are parallel stories involving different characters but all illustrating the struggle for survival of the lower middle classes during the Depression.

Never Love a Stranger is, with regard to incident and characterization, an intensely autobiographical novel. Even the name of the hero is Frankie Kane, the name Robbins received when he was, like his hero, a foundling, but Robbins imposes his fine sense of plot closure on the materials of his life up to this time (many of them reused, of course, in A Stone for Danny Fisher). The point of view of this novel is of interest because it has the same advantages for storytelling as the point of view adopted in A Stone for Danny Fisher. Frankie Kane narrates most of his own story in the first person, but the main narration is interrupted in places for first-person reminiscences by his friends. This allows Robbins to include the death of his hero — or anti-hero, for Frankie Kane is a stoic victim of social conditions just like Danny Fisher. Never Love a Stranger puts considerable emphasis on sex in a way that alienated reviewers, but Robbins was praised for his handling of religious misunderstandings and for his characterization. Some reviewers complained that the hero lacked introspection, leaving readers uncertain of his motivation; however, as in the case of Danny Fisher, this lack of introspection is the key to the social theme of the book.

79 Park Avenue is a rare use by Robbins of a female central character (The Lonely Lady [1976] is another). It is essentially the same story as A Stone for Danny Fisher and Never Love a Stranger, but Marja Fuldicki survives by turning to prostitution rather than gangsterism.

The book was an early use by Robbins of the roman a clef since it is based in part on the Jelke trial.

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