Save Me, Joe Louis Short Guide

Save Me, Joe Louis by Madison Smartt Bell

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Characters

As in his earlier novels, Bell uses an ensemble of people whose behavior becomes comprehensible as they reflect, primarily in flashbacks, upon their personal histories. Thus, although one level of the plot involves their current interactions with each other and with the minor characters, the reader comes to understand the actions of the major characters only as they gradually reveal the secrets of their pasts. In Save Me, Joe Louis these characters are Macrae, Charlie, Porter, and Lacy. After a "Prologue" which introduces the principal female character, Lacy, and suggests her importance in Macrae's life, "Part 1: Hell's Kitchen" opens with the first encounter between Macrae and Charlie and recounts their initial successes as small-time criminals who force their victims to withdraw the maximum amount from bank card machines; in "Part 2: Charm City," these two muggers meet Porter, who becomes their wheel-man as the violence of their crime escalates to armed robbery; "Part 3: Down Home" adds the sexual complication of Lacy's presence; and by the end of "Part 4: Swamp," the fates of all four characters are somewhat resolved.

Macrae seems central to this novel in the same way that Johnny B. Goode is central to The Washington Square Ensemble (1983) and Clarence Dmitri Larkin is to Waiting for the End of the World (1985). Like the earlier characters, he is the subject of an extensive psychological profile, and much of the action is narrated through his consciousness, but little physical description is given.

Readers learn only that he is tall and thin and that his speech reveals his Southern roots. Reared on a hillside farm on the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee, Macrae seems attuned to the work and the pace of rural life, as Charlie is chagrined to discover when they hide out for several weeks on the land owned by Macrae's father. Macrae retains some human ties, however weak, with Lacy, his father, his community, and even his land. Thus, he quickly adapts to the familiar pattern of caring for the livestock, repairing the house itself, and playing country music with his longtime neighbors.

Eventually Bell reveals the circumstances that have forced Macrae to leave home: He fought with, and nearly killed, the obnoxious neighbor who bragged about sexual encounters with Lacy. Given the choice of joining the army or being tried for attempted murder, Macrae chose the army, and again he appeared to adapt well to his environment. Shortly before the end of his enlistment, however, he deserted, evading the military police by becoming one of New York City's anonymous street people.

When he approaches Charlie, Macrae seems to be merely another cold and hungry panhandler, but as he proves during their muggings, Macrae possesses a sense of values Charlie lacks.

Although inadequately dressed for the bitter weather, Macrae refuses to steal a victim's jacket, and he actually tries to make the victims more comfortable.

In short, Macrae is willing to take people's money; but, initially at least, he wants to avoid brutality, and he actually seems to hope his victims will consider him a nice person. Likewise, when Charlie and Porter seem headed for a confrontation at their first meeting, Macrae is the peace-maker responsible for their eventual partnership. As the most reasonable member of the trio, for some time Macrae manages to restrain Charlie and postpone the escalating violence.

Nevertheless, in Macrae's personality too, violence lurks just beneath the surface. When the pimp Big Tee punishes Macrae by forcing him to watch the execution of the prostitute Bea, Macrae carefully executes his revenge, a terrible beating which leaves Big Tee partially paralyzed but not dead. (Macrae's response when Big Tee begs to be killed is only to kick the pimp's pistol almost within reach.) Likewise, when Charlie seems to flaunt his sexual relationship with Lacy, Macrae is induced to engage in the armored car robbery which Lacy considers a romantic escapade. Their outlaw solidarity has been betrayed, however, and neither can trust the other again. Although helping each other is to their mutual advantage for some time, both realize that eventually one must eliminate the other.

If readers are drawn to Macrae, they are likely to share his ambivalence toward Charlie. The product of a dysfunctional mill-town family in the coastal South, Charlie is considerably older and more ruthless than Macrae.

In fact, Charlie comments that he is old enough to be the younger man's father, and for much of the novel he serves essentially as a mentor, educating Macrae — and later, Porter — in the techniques and the mentality of crime.

Actually, though, Charlie helps others only when doing so advances his own interests in some way, and increasingly his actions reveal him to be an unstable personality who cannot be trusted. He does not attempt to sleep with Bea during the time she is living with Macrae, but he hints that he could and would if she were not a prostitute.

Thus, when he is vaguely attracted to Lacy, his partnership with Macrae does not deter him from engaging in casual sex with her.

Charlie believes in taking what he wants, whether it is money, personal possessions, or sex; but he is motivated primarily by a desire for power over others and an addiction to the exhilaration of matching his skills against those of the lawmen pursuing him. Thus, Charlie is bored when he is not planning or executing a robbery, and he courts danger as when he mugs a bank vice-president in the daytime or when he unnecessarily steals a vintage automobile in Nashville. The only member of the trio to shoot any of the victims, he raises the stakes for Macrae and Porter, and after Porter is killed, Macrae realizes it is only a matter of time until Charlie comes to see him too as a threat that must be eliminated.

As the only African-American member of the trio, Porter occupies a position analogous to that of Yusuf Ali in The Washington Square Ensemble. (His loyalty to Macrae resembles Ali's loyalty to Johnny B. Goode.) Like Macrae and Charlie, he is a violent

man barely under control. Unable to channel his aggression into a socially acceptable activity as his boxer friends have done, Porter has served prison time for assault. Now out on parole, Porter finds his former ties weakened (as in the case of Jaybone, the nationally-ranked contender) or completely severed (as in the case of Carole, his former girlfriend). Unlike Charlie, however, Porter is not completely without ties; he remains on speaking terms with his former running buddy, Jerome; in Nashville, he builds a friendship with Macrae's neighbor Rodney; he displays pride in his house; and he is concerned about his dog, Sooner, even taking him along when the trio flee to Tennessee.

Porter's association with Macrae and Charlie leads him into increasingly violent criminal activities, however, and despite the fact that he never shoots anyone, he is the one eventually shot and killed by the police.

The fourth major character, Lacy, serves more or less as a catalyst for the action. In the prologue, she is shown to be as much adrift as Macrae, Charlie, or Porter. A photographer, she seems to prefer seeing life through the distancing mechanism of the camera lens.

She has mastered the techniques of obtaining sophisticated photographic images, but she cares little about the people and objects she photographs.

She returns to Tennessee because developing some old film reminds her of the past and especially of her relationship with Macrae. When they revisit their old haunts and attempt to recapture their old relationship, they are perhaps too successful: Lacy again betrays Macrae through casual sex with a man she actually dislikes, and Macrae's anger precipitates violence. At the end of the novel, she — like Macrae and Charlie — returns to Macrae's land, but Bell deliberately leaves her future with Macrae extremely uncertain.

In Bell's novels, the minor characters seem to exist only to advance the plot.

Given the episodic nature of the action, it is not surprising that these characters are present only briefly and then completely disappear. Thus, the presence of two significant minor characters becomes exceptionally striking. Both Bea and Macrae's father merit critical attention. Macrae is attracted to Bea even though he knows this young Hispanic girl is an established prostitute.

His impulsive defense of her and his reluctance to accept her services as repayment lead eventually to an emotional, as well as physical, attachment between them. Another aimless, rootless character — Bea serves primarily, however, as a foil for Lacy. Macrae's involvement with each woman involves a kind of sexual frustration which, in turn, unleashes the violent side of his personality and, so, disrupts the pattern of his life. In contrast, Macrae's father appears to bring a degree of stability to his life. The old man's literal blindness parallels his son's failures of perception, but his stubborn attempts to maintain a rural lifestyle on land valuable only for commercial development emphasizes his son's similar ties to the farm. His death and "home burial" not only

reflect the way he has lived, but postpone the time when Macrae must give up the sanctu ary he has found on his father's farm.

Social Concerns

In the "Hell's Kitchen" section, Bell seems poised to explore urban America's problem with poverty and homelessness. Macrae and Charlie are homeless men who survive by panhandling, and apparently poverty has forced Bea to become a prostitute. Soon, though, the reader begins to suspect that these characters' behavior is more a matter of choice than one of fate.

Bell seems to raise the question of criminal behavior and its causes. Charlie, Macrae, and Porter may be treated sympathetically, but they represent failures of the justice system. In Charlie's case, a college education has not been a deterrent to crime. Macrae has been allowed to avoid prison by enlisting in the army, but eventually he too becomes an outlaw. Likewise, Porter's case shows that youth programs and the efforts of well-meaning individuals cannot overcome some individuals' innate violence. For each of these characters, criminality seems inevitable, perhaps even predestined.

In Save Me, Joe Louis Bell portrays the seedy side of city life. The urban characters are criminals involved in mugging, prostitution, armed robbery, and murder. Likewise, all the urban settings are associated with some type of criminal activity; the characters' only respite from crime is the interlude at Macrae's farm, and even here the threat of violent crime impinges upon the action as the city is beginning to encroach upon the farmland. Nevertheless, for Macrae's father — and apparently for Macrae too — the land seems ultimately to be a refuge from both the city and the development of the suburbs.

Techniques

In structure, Save Me, Joe Louis is a typical Madison Smartt Bell novel.

Composed of a prologue and four sections, it uses vivid imagery and emotive language to develop motifs of isolation, reunion, flight, and alienation. Just as discordant musical motifs are woven into a unified jazz composition, the disparate characters and themes are brought together in a harmonious dissonance resembling that of new-age music, as Bell develops the plot through glimpses into the psyches of Macrae, Charlie, Porter, and Lacy.

Bell's poetic language and vivid imagery also resemble the individual variations played by jazz soloists.

This highly symbolic novel's overall movement is southward, from New York City to Baltimore to the Nashville suburbs to the swampland of coastal South Carolina. With each section the influence of traditional American society is increasingly weakened, the violence is escalated, and the partnership of the characters is undermined. In "Hell's Kitchen" Macrae and Charlie are merely four-hundred-dollar muggers, and their loyalty to each other appears to be intact. The addition of Porter in "Charm City" introduces the possibility of shifting alliances and diminished loyalty. "Down Home" demonstrates not only the growing differences between Macrae and Charlie, but also the increasing temperamental affinity between Macrae and Porter.

"Swamp," the climactic final section, is the most symbolic. Although initially Macrae, Charlie, and Porter are still together, now these characters can no longer rely upon each other; in fact, Macrae and Charlie abandon Porter, and Macrae is surprised when Charlie gives him a ride as they flee the Carolina police. In his escape through the swamp, Macrae has gained insight, though, and he knows that Charlie's motives are not altruistic. When he finally digs the grave in the swampy land behind his father's barn, Macrae knows that one of them must soon occupy it.

Like most of Bell's earlier novels, Save Me, Joe Louis ends somewhat inconclusively, probably because Bell seems to deplore conclusions that neatly resolve all the plot complications. As part of his concern with realistic depiction of life, Bell frequently leaves his readers uncertain about the eventual fates of his characters. In this novel he provides outcomes for Porter, Charlie, and Macrae's father, but he leaves Macrae and Lacy staring at each other "as though they have never before seen each other." Of course, on one level, they have shared an entirely new experience, and now they know each other in a totally new way. For the events of this novel, there can be no simple, satisfactory conclusion, and Bell shows both consistency and wisdom in refusing to provide one.

Themes

Bell portrays alienated characters who find the modern world deficient in meaning and lacking in accepted values. His dominant theme is the alternative social order created by these misfits unable to adapt to the larger society. In Save Me, Joe Louis, customary social values have faded so far into the background that they have little direct effect upon Macrae, Charlie, or Porter.

Because Bell immerses the reader quickly and completely in the consciousness of these characters, the social establishment seems almost irrelevant, and the reader is caught up in the world of muggers, drug pushers, pimps, prostitutes, and robbers — where no laws of the larger society apply. Generally, the rule is "live and let live"; and in cases of offense or injury, the recourse is not to the law but to personal vengeance.

In the hierarchy of this alternative culture, each of these misfits has an individual place. Their sense of isolation is temporarily assuaged by the links forged of proximity and need, and for a time, individual codes of behavior seem to offer a satisfactory substitute for accepted social standards. This social order is fragile, however. Ultimately the characters are misfits, equally unable to adapt to the alternative order. Faced with the tests of greed and self-interest, their individual values prove no stronger than those of traditional society, and the characters' alliance collapses in treachery and betrayal. Thus, Macrae and Charlie abandon Porter and eventually turn upon each other.

Key Questions

Critics mostly frequently praise Bell for his ability to create vivid characters who engage the reader's sympathy and disgust at the same time. In this novel, the primary example is Macrae. Discussion groups might want to examine the elements in his personality which make him more sympathetic than Charlie.

Additional possibilities for analysis are the ways in which Macrae (and perhaps other characters as well) reenforce and contradict regional and ethnic stereotypes. Likewise, any consideration of the characters should involve the degree of accuracy with which Bell portrays women.

Several of Bell's characters are musicians, and critics have compared the structure of the novels to that of musical compositions. Each novel seems to be constructed of separate movements, and a theme introduced in one section generally is expanded upon or modified in a later section. Discussion groups might choose to analyze the novel's structure, focusing upon the relationships developed among the parts.

Bell's experience in the film industry is obvious in his use of flashbacks, interior monologues, and extended narratives, and also in his use of language. His prose has been called lyrical and poetic, and he manipulates the actual sounds of the language as a musician uses notes and chords to create tone or as film-makers use music to heighten the audience's emotional response at climactic moments. Discussants might want to analyze Bell's choices of diction (individual words) and syntax (sentence structure) and to consider the ways these choices evoke and reenforce the reader's emotions.

Bell has been faulted for episodic structure and inconclusive endings.

Discussion groups might want to consider the ending of this novel and the reasons some readers find it unsatisfactory. An issue that should be addressed is the relationship between this type of ending and Bell's insistence upon fiction that is absolutely true to everyday life. If episodes in life do not have neat divisions (like beginning, middle, and end) can the novelist portray fictional life in that way? In other words, if a writer views modern life as "absurd" (without pattern or meaning), should not the fiction reflect that attitude?

1. Bell gives the title "Hell's Kitchen" to the first section of this novel.

Literally, what is Hell's Kitchen? How did the name come to be applied to that area? Why is the title literally and symbolically appropriate for the first part of the novel?

2. The second section of the novel, "Charm City," refers to a section of Baltimore. How is this title also appropriate?

3. What changes in modus operandi do Charlie and Macrae make when they move their operation to Baltimore? What change occurs in the attitude(s) of their victims?

4. What type of relationship develops between Macrae and Bea? How does their relationship parallel Macrae's relationship with Lacy?

5. Rafael and Big Tee are minor characters in this novel. What is the role of each? How do they resemble characters in The Washington Square Ensemble?

6. At times Bell appears to employ racial stereotypes, but in the course of the narrative, these stereotypes frequently are undercut. Cite specific examples.

7. Macrae considers himself less violent than Charlie, but hints about his past foreshadow the paradoxically violent side of his character, which increasingly emerges. Show how Bell reveals the violent side of Macrae's personality while making him seem more emotionally stable, and even likable, than Charlie. How accurate is the reader's initial assessment of Macrae?

8. Unlike Macrae's history, which is gradually revealed, Porter's story is related at the time Macrae and Charlie meet him. Some critics use the term digression to describe Bell's technique of providing details of his characters' backgrounds. Others consider these passages some of his most effective writing. Why does Bell use these flashbacks and characters' conversations?

Would such characters think and talk in this way?

9. Throughout the novel, Charlie is set up as a brutal, violent character.

What actions prepare the reader for the violence to come?

10. In the course of the novel, the level of violence increases and the pace of the novel accelerates. Show how the characters' behavior becomes more violent and the novel seems to move more quickly, both in actual elapsed time and heightened emotional levels.

11. Macrae is portrayed as both a musician and an artist. How do these skills set him apart from Charlie? What skills does Porter possess that similarly set him apart from Charlie?

12. Why does Bell make Porter an African-American character? What does his ethnic identity add to the novel's overall theme?

13. What is the function of the "Down Home" section in the overall pattern of the novel? Obviously, with the presence of Punkinhead, this period is not idyllic, but is the section in any way a pastoral? Does it suggests alternatives for any or all of the three outlaws?

14. Describe Macrae's emotions to ward Lacy and her attitudes toward him. Explain how these feelings influence the lives of all the characters. Is this a typical, or even credible, modern relationship?

15. In the final pages, Macrae kills and buries Charlie. Is this conclusion inevitable? Explain.

16. In the concluding chapter, Macrae buries both his father and Charlie.

How are the two burials different? In what ways are they similar? Explain the points of comparison and contrast.

17. Near the end of the novel Macrae risks exposure when he draws a gun on a store clerk, apparently only so he can free a caged fox. Why does he consider it important to free the fox? Why isn't he angry when the fox bites him? What is the symbolic significance of the fox?

18. Why is the final section entitled "The Swamp"? How is the title literally and symbolically appropriate?

19. The novel's ending is inconclusive at best. Why does Bell stop before he resolves the relationship between Macrae and Lacy? Describe the range of possible speculations about the future of these two characters.

20. There are several references to Joe Louis, the boxing champion, and Porter's story of the executed convict explains the phrase, "Save me, Joe Louis." For Bell, though, the title's meaning obviously is something much more significant. Consider all the implications of Louis as a heroic figure and the characters' need for someone heroic to save them.

Literary Precedents

Bell cites novelist Walker Percy as the most direct influence upon his fiction; like Percy, he attempts to portray a realistic slice of modern life with all its absurdity. Indirect influences perhaps are Andrew Lytle, who taught a generation of young writers the impact that can be achieved by a sequence of introspective psychological narratives, and Flannery O'Connor, who demonstrated the significance that can be revealed through the use of grotesques. As a film-maker, Bell cannot have been unaffected by America's long history of gangster movies and the so-called "buddy movies," such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), in which appealing outlaws join forces in a rebellion against the social establishment. No doubt the influence of contemporary action/adventure movies and novels can also be seen. In addition, Bell's choice of the mystery novel genre in Straight Cut (1986) suggests the influence of the hard-boiled detective novel from Raymond Chandler to Walter Mosley.

Related Titles

In technique, Save Me, Joe Louis resembles The Washington Square Ensemble and Waiting for the End of the World. All three novels are constructed in movements similar to those in an orchestral composition; all concentrate upon social misfits whose emotional wounds are vividly portrayed; and in all three, the author's intent is a realistic depiction of the dislocation inherent in modern urban life. Also, Laidlow and Rodney, two of this novel's minor characters appear as more important characters in Bell's earlier novel, Soldier's Joy (1989).

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