Shiloh and Other Stories Short Guide

Shiloh and Other Stories by Bobbie Ann Mason

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Characters

The title story of the collection, Shiloh and Other Stories, is typical of the development of Mason's characters throughout the volume. In "Shiloh," Leroy Moffit has suffered a leg injury which has curtailed his career as a truck driver. He and his wife, Norma Jean, live in a small, nondescript house in Kentucky, while he pursues dreams of building a log cabin for himself and his wife. Norma Jean embarks on a course of self-improvement, pursuing programs in everything from physical fitness to English composition. Like many of Mason's characters, Norma Jean's aspirations for individual development appear somewhat naive and limited; however, they do have real consequences.

Norma Jean's mother has constantly urged Norma Jean and Leroy to visit the Civil War battlefield at Shiloh, the site of her own honeymoon, and when they do visit the site, partly to escape from their own disintegrating relationship, Norma Jean announces that she is leaving Leroy. Typical of Mason's characters, this breakdown seems both inevitable and pathetic. Neither is able to grow in the present circumstances, yet Leroy is unable to formulate the means to make their relationship a ground for real individual development.

Much the same dilemma is faced by the older couple Mary Lou and Mack Skaggs in "Rookers." While Mary Lou plays cards with older women friends and socializes in town, Mack stays home with the woodworking projects that are both his livelihood and his refuge from the world. He tries to read to keep up with their daughter who is away at college, but when she comes home before her exams, Mack is largely unable to communicate with her. This attitude is best captured at the end of the story by his telephone calls to the weather recording, which allows him to feign communication without speaking.

This sense of estrangement also characterizes Mason's women. The young girl, Peggy Jo, in "Detroit Skyline," visits her aunt and uncle in Detroit with her mother shortly after the introduction of television in America.

During this visit her mother suffers a miscarriage, while Peggy Jo learns of the nascent world of television and about the "red scare" that is worrying her uncle and jeopardizing his job. For Peggy Jo, the promise of Detroit's skyline seems both alluring and threatening, and her experiences are very distant from her home in Kentucky.

Much the same distance is described in "Drawing Names," when Carolyn Sisson attends a Christmas dinner with her family. She and her sisters try to maintain a sense of familial harmony, but this often means placating their husbands or boyfriends, and Carolyn's own lover, Kent, fails to show up for the occasion. Most difficult of all are Carolyn's father and Pappy, her mother's father. Carolyn ultimately elicits a compassionate response from Jim, the man living with her sister, Laura Jean, whose presence at this family dinner is not entirely well received, particularly by the other men. Jim's outsider status as a Northerner and as someone who is morally suspect in this conservative family gives him insight into Carolyn's feelings of alienation. And although

Carolyn feels closer to Jim at the end of the story and somewhat free of her family's often oppressive judgments, her estrangement from this supposed harmony is not diminished.

In the story "Nancy Culpepper," the title character searches for a photo of her namesake great-great-aunt, and this search becomes emblematic of a larger attempt to connect herself to her ancestors. She, like other female figures in Mason's work, feels distanced from her family, but Nancy's distance has been caused by her move to the North and her advanced education.

On the whole, Mason's stories depict characters who are experiencing both a transformation of the family and a dissolution of the ways of economic life that had traditionally defined their families. Within this context, they are forced to establish a separate identity to achieve reconciliations, however temporary, with their lovers, parents, and siblings.

Social Concerns/Themes

Typical of realistic writing generally, Mason's first collection of short stories is strongly oriented toward documenting the social lives of her characters. In Mason's version of life in western Kentucky, these concerns are predominantly economic and familial.

On the one hand, Mason demonstrates at great length the disjunction between the limited horizons of predominantly rural Kentucky life and the world of television and consumer culture with which it collides. This generates one of Mason's often repeated themes, that of the person who desires to flee a constraining environment. On the other hand, she also asserts the powerful pull of familial connections upon these often frustrated individuals.

The emotional world of Mason's fiction is one that is governed frequently by disappointment, compromise, divorce, and diminished expectations. This, however, is principally true of those figures who grew up under the shadow of the end of provincial life and the arrival of mainstream America in western Kentucky. Typically, they have factory jobs in an increasingly threatened industrial base, or they pursue a living on the low-paying fringes of commercial life. The older generation, frequently rural and seemingly innocent of or indifferent to the contemporary world, is the source of familial affiliations, and many of Mason's female characters find themselves torn between the roles of daughter and independent woman in a transformed social world.

The female characters are also usually the focus of the narration, and her work is in this respect characteristic of recent women's fiction in America. But what is perhaps distinctive about Mason's fiction is her singular preoccupation with popular culture. Her frequent references to television programs, popular music, brand names, and fads is used to suggest the limitations of the characters she explores, but it is also a means of demonstrating the emotional sophistication of the responses and the wit of her characters, who exploit this range of references often as an ironic counterpoint to and commentary upon their lives.

Techniques

Mason's fiction has been described by one reviewer as "shopping mall realism," and one of its most conspicuous achievements is its overall appearance of artlessness. This avoidance of obvious stylization is consistent with the aspiration of a realistic writer to present fiction as an accurate and faithful transcription of the real world, not as an elaborate and contrived story. To substantiate this claim to authenticity, Mason dwells upon the circumstantial details of the experience she describes, and this is particularly true of her use of popular culture. In contrast to those writers who depend upon references to other literary works to give their texts resonance, Mason relies upon popular culture as source of many of her allusions. For example, Norma Jean of "Shiloh," as the narrator notes, bears the real first names of Marilyn Monroe.

Shiloh and Other Stories belongs to the literary tradition of the related short story series. James Joyce'sDubliners (1914) is a good example of such a text, but much closer to Mason is Ernest Hemingway's first book of short stories, In Our Time (1925). With respect to her contemporaries, Mason is squarely within the tradition of recent American minimalist writing, and one might compare Shiloh and Other Stories with the similar collection by Raymond Carver, Cathedral (1983).

Key Questions

Abundant opportunity for discussion of familial and social relationships exists in the various stories Mason presents in this collection. Readers might want to list the many themes they encounter, such as parenthood, sibling relationships, spousal relationships, forgiveness, the power of memory, etc., then go back and find such themes in individual stories to note how the varied plots can focus upon identical themes. Most readers will see themselves in one or more of Mason's characters, or at least an aspect of themselves. An enjoyable exercise is the discussion of which character individual group members are most strongly attracted to and why.

1. Discuss the effects of depressed economic conditions upon the various characters of Mason's short stories.

2. How does television work as a negative influence in the lives of Mason's short stories.

3. Choose one female character from a Mason story who you think best represents Mason's idea of a "heroine".

Explain why.

4. Choose one male character from a Mason story who you think best represents Mason's idea of a "hero". Explain why.

5. In "Drawing Names", why is Carolyn attracted to Jim? How can you defend this aspect of Mason's plot as realistic?

6. Explain which of the stories is your favorite and why.

7. Can any positive message be drawn from the dissolution of the relationship between Leroy and Norma Jean in "Shiloh"?

8. Discuss the theme of communication seen in "Rookers."

9. In "Nancy Culpepper", the theme of personal identity is seen in Nancy's curiosity regarding her ancestors. Does she ever reach "closure" regarding her own identity and place in the family?

10. Which, if any, of Mason's short story characters seems determined to carry on family traditions? Analyze why each feels this necessity.

Related Titles

While Shiloh and Other Stories might be said to anticipate much of Mason's subsequent fiction in its thematic concerns and technical strategies, at least one story foreshadows a subsequent work. The Culpepper family is the subject of Mason's second novel Spence + Lila (1989), which is in many a ways a metaphoric extension of the events outlined in Mason's story, "Nancy Culpepper."

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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