Slot Machine Short Guide

Slot Machine by Chris Lynch

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Overview

One of the most prevalent pressures that Lynch's protagonists face is the destructive social tendency to categorize everyone. "In much of my work," he says, "I describe people who are struggling with who they are, with people's perceptions of them.... People will always have an interest in labeling," or as Slot Machine suggests, insisting that everyone has a slot that they need to locate in order to fit comfortably into an ordered social organization. Lynch sees his work as a direct challenge to this kind of conformist thinking, asserting, "it is up to the individual to escape the label. To grow out of it. To be more than the label says. I sort of tell my readers that all the time." Slot Machine concentrates on a young man— thirteen but often sounding as if he were going on thirty—who would seem particularly vulnerable to the demands of the summer camp designed to place boys entering high school in an appropriate niche. He is overweight, unathletic, literary, imaginative, and the only son of a single mother who is herself a bit eccentric and mildly noncomformist. In the company of two true friends—both much more apparently suited to the rigid demands of the sports-crazed camp and its slogan-shouting, macho-preen-ing, sense-deadened ruling adults—Elvin dreads the three-week session and is prepared to accept whatever humiliations and physical degradation the camp delivers. However, his capacity for recognizing the comic absurdity of many of the camp's programs, and his ability to see humor in situations even when he is insulted and subjected to all sorts of physical stress— and then to use his wit for self-protection and as a method for disconcerting adver-saries—give him a basis for coping with the initial unpleasantness of the camp. Gradually, he finds that the physical challenges are not entirely negative, that he can participate in some sports even if he is not a natural athlete, and that he is not the only one who has no obvious "slot" in the sportsmachine that dominates the camp.

Lynch's attitude towards athletic endeavor is interestingly ambivalent. His early books involved young men who recognized and utilized their athletic prowess as a badge of achievement, depending on sporting success as a validation of their lives when other avenues were closed and other institutions (family, school) failed to provide support. Elvin's body is not only ill-suited to games but constructed so that he is immediately made the subject of derision due to his appearance. Understandably, he has avoided sports. Slot Machine is devastating in its depiction of limited individuals who are so dependent on athletic success that they have lost all sense of the value of the sport itself, while Elvin's dogged, goodnatured determination and his resilience in the face of rebuffs enable him to eventually realize that there is some sport (wrestling, running) that almost everyone can enjoy, even if they are not a star or a "winner." When he finally discovers the "Arts Sector" where the other apparent misfits and the more mature, sharp adult Brothers are thriving, he has reached a position of relative contentment, accepting his singularity with equanimity—"I'm still whatever it is I am"— and strengthened by the knowledge that "They can't touch that" even if he does not yet know exactly what "that" is. The camp has been a test which Elvin needed to take, an emergence from a protected environment to face a world where intimidation and acceptance are the dominant features of an authoritarian operation that has substituted

complete control for a legitimate appeal to a person's priorities. Elvin's journey toward self-discovery and self-confi-dence is a late-twentieth-century exemplar of the classic coming-of-age narrative, a contemporary American expression of a timeless tradition presented with vigor and humor by a writer with exceptional insight about the years he has called "the god-awful messy in-between period of adolescence."

About the Author

Chris Lynch was the fifth of seven children raised in the Jamaica Plains neighborhood of Boston by Edward Lynch, a bus driver, and his wife Dorothy O'Brien Lynch, who worked as a receptionist. The community was originally one of the historic Irish districts of Boston, but by the time Lynch was born in 1962, it also included a large Hispanic population. Lynch's father died when he was five, and he recalls that his mother "did a good job of covering it up, but things were pretty lean back then." Lynch attended Catholic schools on the primary and secondary level and while he describes himself as not "what you'd call bookish," he enjoyed belonging to a Dr. Seuss Book Club because he liked getting "my own book in the mail." His favorite reading in the early grades included military histories and biographies of sports figures "but not fiction. Not yet." While his grammar school experiences were generally pleasant, he was unhappy in high school, which he remembers as "an all-boys football factory" where "nothing like the arts was encouraged in any way." He had enjoyed sports until then, but was repelled by the rigidity of the athletic programs in his high school, which fostered a "macho ethos and let athletes run wild."

His discomfort with the direction and atmosphere of the school led him to drop out during his junior year, and after completing the necessary requirements, he enrolled at Boston University as a political science major. Dissatisfied with the program, he was excited by a course in newswriting which gave him a sense of his true vocation. He transferred to Suffolk University where he took more courses toward a journalism major, including a novel writing class which "helped lead me closer to what I was really going for all the time." Still essentially ruled by a social ethic that excluded the possibility of an artistic career, Lynch spent six years after graduating in a variety of jobs, working as a house painter and a moving van driver before taking a position as a proofreader of financial reports. The drudgery of that task "can really give a person a kind of shove," Lynch has commented. "I figured there had to be something more out there," and he enrolled in a master's degree program in publishing and journalism at Emerson University in 1989. He feels that he was still avoiding his calling as a writer at this time, "hiding, you know," by thinking of himself as an editor rather than a creative writer. He did not tell his mother what he was actually doing until "after I published my first book," Shadow Boxer, in 1993.

Shadow Boxer developed out of an assignment in a class on children's writing where he was asked to write five pages on a childhood incident. As Lynch told J. Sydney Jones in an interview: I had a vague idea of writing some things my brother and I had done in our youth, but as soon as I sat down with it, I was off to the races. The stuff just poured out. Before this all my adult fiction had been too stylized, what everybody else was doing. What I thought was expected of me. I had no emotional investment in my own work; and that makes all the difference. With this assignment, the very first words actually made it into the actual published book. I was fortunate to discover early in my career that one bit of writing magic—matching yourself and your material.

Lynch wrote about sixty percent of the novel in class and finished the book in 1992. He estimates that about one fifth of the book is based on autobiographical material in a narrative that follows two brothers trying to deal with the death of their father, a moderately talented but dedicated professional prize fighter. One of the features of the novel is Lynch's use of an episodic structure, a technique which he found "incredibly liberating" since he did not see smooth transitions in his own life. He identifies Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio as a crucial influence in this regard, and says that Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays helped him to understand a method for assembling scenes so that "at the end you don't miss the transitions." From the beginning, he based his books on the protagonists, remarking, "I don't really plot my books. I write characters; that's where it all starts."

The deep imprint of some of the conflicts and struggles of his youth and adolescence forms the basis of the fiction Lynch has written about and directed toward young adult readers. His serious regard for this audience is reflected in his assertion that "It is not worth less to create work for a fifteen-year-old than for a forty-year-old." Drawing on his own experiences, Lynch insists that "This group, this constituency, has got a set of concerns and interests as serious and complex as any other population." Defining his subject further, he draws a distinction between age groups, explaining, "As they are not children, adolescents are also not adults. They are Young Adults." His attraction for this time in a person's life is made clear by his observation that "Writing about the great lurch from childhood to adulthood is just as frightening, exhilarating, complicated, and dangerous as living it was (remember that?)."

While Shadow Boxer was in the final stages of preparation for publication, Lynch had begun his second novel, Iceman, which he told Jones is "the closest to being autobiographical in the whole inability to express yourself. Where does that go, the frustration. It's got to go someplace." The anger and destructive rage of the book's protagonist and the inner tension of his family echo the problems of Shadow Boxer and anticipate, to some extent, the narrative of Gypsy Davey where the title character, a sweetly decent, slightly brain-damaged youth, tries to rescue his sister's son from a cycle of neglect on the mean streets of a decaying inner city neighborhood. Lynch's first three novels, and the Blue-Eyed Son trilogy of 1996, which confronts the racism in Boston "that has been happening all along," deal with the turmoil of adolescents "struggling with who they are, with peo-ple's perceptions of them," and concentrates on a character who uses his physical powers to deal with problems and challenges.

Slot Machine is also about a youth, Elvin Bishop, who is out of step with the prevailing social expectations of his society. A thirteen-year-old sent for the summer to a Christian Brothers camp supposed to prepare him for high school, Elvin speaks in a voice that Lynch says "more closely represents the way I talk than the other narrators." While Lynch notes that "the events of the book are as grim as in some of my other books," Elvin's ability to see his predicament (he is not an athlete and therefore has no special "slots" in the camp's elaborate and rigid social matrix) with a degree of wry humor gives the book a mood distinctly different from his previous work, a mood that Lynch explored further in Political Timber. That book follows a high school senior running for mayor in a New England town, which Lynch wrote when "I saw this kid's picture in the paper and he

was a goof. It was all a lark to him. I loved that spirit and went with it." Lynch's ability to give each of his protagonists a distinct personality is a central feature of his work, but they are all young men who are animated by a passionate spirit that enables them to respond to the sometimes severe situations of their lives without declining into despondency or discouragement.

Setting

Slot Machine has one basic location, the Christian Brothers Academy Camp which is set in "the idyllic rolling green hills of the St. Paul's Seminary Retreat Center" (as the brochure describes it) somewhere in the New England countryside. The purpose of summer camps like this one was originally to give urban youngsters an opportunity to experience the natural world. While the landscape beyond the campgrounds retains the features of the New England landscape that have inspired writers from Emerson and Thoreau to Robert Frost and Donald Hall, the camp compound resembles a minimum security prison, with tendencies leaning toward a more subtle concept of incarceration. From the introductory letter, which combines exhortation with threatened co-ercion —"You will have fun. We insist"—to the hyper-organized schedule limiting freedom of action, the various "sectors" designed for specific activities and the assemblies gathering the entire population for pep-talks and promotional shows, the camp is a simulation of a world where individual initiative is discouraged. The beauty of the setting is effectively irrelevant.

On the other hand, as Elvin begins to resist the regimentation of the program, he and his enlightened friend Mikie venture beyond the bounds of the camp into the natural world where they find, in the spirit of the American frontier, room for exploration and inspiration. Hiking and running through the woods and hills gives them moments of exhilaration. These interludes are momentary and brief, however, and do not lead to the kind of reflective contemplation that the wilderness can provide. For Elvin, the library and the Arts Sector, quiet and peaceful places permitting the mind to move into interesting areas, are his regions of comfort and safety since he is primarily an indoor person whose preferences are similar to Emily Dickinson's in the wellknown poem beginning "The Brain—is wider than the Sky." The outdoors is also corrupted by the upperclassmen who use it for drunken binges, cruel hazing, and stupid sexual exhibitionism, not ruining its essence but temporarily spoiling it by their actions which turn Eden into Gommorah. In spite of its setting, the entire thrust of the camp is away from the cast of mind which can appreciate and profit from contact with the intricate details of the environment.

Social Sensitivity

Slot Machine focuses on the social tendency toward categorization as a short-hand method for placing people in convenient, easily defined packages so that it is not necessary to know anything beyond their most obvious features. The connections between that attitude and the prejudices which label people with some ethnic slur or stereotypical racial trait are not stressed or even mentioned but are clearly evident. With this as a kind of framework, Lynch directs his critique more specifically at the male-oriented, masculine supremist social construct which rates sports as the highest calling, places everything else in a descending hierarchy with the arts near the bottom, and encourages many types of behavior which are not only useless and destructive in a non-athletic context, but are likely to ruin everything that is valuable in the sport itself. The Brothers who are running the camp are a grotesque parody of coaches who have no interest in a person beyond his contribution to the team. They are loud, abrasive, and prone to condone and exercise violence. The sports pages of newspapers at the end of the twentieth century are full of stories about people like this. The immediate effect of their actions is to produce young men replicating their "values" or men who are put off sports entirely. The cumulative effect is to support the system that demeans the non-athlete, dismisses women as auxiliaries or trophies, and shapes definitions of masculinity and femininity that are narrow and destructive. For adolescents who are in the process of forming a personal identity and learning about the mysterious complexities of human nature, this kind of social system, as Lynch demonstrates, is very dangerous. It is also one which offers rewards to a kind of conformist non-thinking that is at the root of totalitarian regimes, ones which require unreflective obedience and the scapegoating of anyone who differs from a prescribed pattern. Frankie's willingness to be mistreated by the privileged boys so he can achieve the same status is a chilling depiction of a fascist mystique in operation.

Conversely, the other young men (and enlightened Brothers) whom Elvin eventually joins in the Arts Sector are a varied, diverse group of individuals, examples of the humane values Lynch believes in. While the remainder of the camp sees them as misfits and outcasts, they have much more to offer than athletic ability, although several of them are superb athletes who are not especially interested in organized games. Their individualism and singularity are seen by some as a direct threat to the athletic hierarchy, and the pampered snobs Frankie aspires to join actually attack the Arts Sector every year, an indication of the tenuous nature of their own identities since they are unsettled by anyone who does not buy into their program. Elvin is immediately accepted by a friendly group of individuals who, he realizes, have been greeting him pleasantly for the past weeks while the football players would "trample me rather than say 'hi' or 'excuse me.'" He is thrilled by people who can declare with enthusiasm, "My name is Lennox. I was a prisoner of wrestling for two weeks. I want to paint." Elvin is not sure what he wants to do, so he just watches for awhile, getting his bearings. Nobody minds, and as Elvin explains it to Mikie, "I don't know what my slot is, or what it's going to be, or if I'm ever going to find a slot. But I figure I could hang out with these guys

while I'm waiting." This is the corrective to all of the people who are afraid that without a "slot" of their own, they will have be left without any identity whatsoever.

Literary Qualities

In explaining his approach to Elvin's journey, Lynch commented, "What makes this book funny is Elvin's filtering of events. The dark underbelly is still there, but delivered through somebody the reader feels better about. He's making jokes about what's happening to him, but the events of the book are as grim as in some of my other books." It is Elvin's extraordinary ability to convey the intensity and the absurdity of his situation that makes Slot Machine so captivating and this is the result of the voice that Lynch has devised for him. As Lynch told Jones in the interview conducted in June of 1996, a year after the book was published, "Elvin's voice more closely resembles the way I talk than the other narrators," which means that Elvin has a degree of eloquence way beyond what might seem possible for a thirteen-year-old. Lynch has managed to make Elvin's articulate, inventive control of language at least plausible because it represents—if in ideal form—the thought processes consistent with his psychological make-up and his extremely intelligent grasp of people's motives and actions. There is also an unabashed, open quality to Elvin's conversa-tion—uncalculated, spontaneous, and laced with references to the things that an adolescent would notice and find pertinent. When he is bothered on the bus to camp by a boy who wants some of his Nutter Butters, he describes his assailant as "a box-headed mouth breather with black eyebrows as wide and shiny as a Groucho mustache." When Frankie tells him, "They're going to make a man out of you, Elvin," he replies, "Right. That's what they said in every prison movie and war movie I ever saw." When Frankie mentions that "certain kinds of guys get picked on," he says, "Ya, like fat guys. What, am I going not to be fat while I'm here?" Elvin's use of ironic, self-depre-cating humor applies an adult's perspective to an adolescent's annoyances and is a relatively effective means of self-protection. One aspect of Elvin's courage and determination is his continued use of this strategy in situations where he is really hurt physically or psychologically, or when he knows that it will further enrage his adversaries and increase his torment. .

As much as this makes Elvin unusual and interesting as a character, his letters to his mother are the place where Lynch really cuts loose in terms of language and cultural awareness. Placed at or near the end of most chapters, the letters are a commentary on the action, a sort of summary and reflective counterpoint to what has taken place and a spot for Elvin (and Lynch) to reveal facets of a personality that could not realistically be presented to anyone other than a complete confidante. Not that much is known about Elvin's mother, aside from her off-beat humor (a key to Elvin's) when she visits the camp, so the letters illuminate their close relationship and show how Elvin might have developed some of his linguistic facility. The letters are addressed with a series of variants suggesting the range of a relationship: "Mother" (basic); "Mrs. Bishop" (propriety); "Mother of all mothers" (ironic affection); "Mom" (unrestricted affection); "Ma" (directness); "Dear birth mother" (formality); "Big Mama Bishop" (folksiness); and at the conclusion, most openly, "Dear Mom." His signatures are similarly contrived to express his mood and his adoption or grudging acceptance of a particular persona: Yours Muy Macho; Elvin "Big Booty" Bishop (his prescribed camp nickname); No Longer Your Concern; Mr. Bishop (quasi adult formality); Ug; Elvin, Son of a Bishop (the bogus hard-

guy); Sincerely; urn, ah, hnn (spaced-out); Your biological son; Oliver Twist (rejection); Yours in Christ; Bishop Elvin (an eye for hypocrisy).

The letters mix heartfelt statements of mood with banter. After a typical humiliation, he writes: You remember my MOLE, don't you Mom? I guess I haven't had a chance to show you my MOLE lately, but picture it just like when I was a baby, only five hundred times larger and bluer.

Or in a completely different mode in another letter: *Was that you the paper showed sitting in the party tent with Placido Domingo after Italy-Spain in Foxboro? He was looking down your dress, you know. Did I not tell you to avoid European men while I'm away?*

The letters, like many of Elvin's pronouncements, are attempts to express his "heart's truth" (in Dylan Thomas's phrase) while concealing or deflecting how true they are with a comic stance written to one who can see the strategy and appreciate it. Each one proclaims and establishes a particular tone that is developed further in accordance with the psychological mood Elvin needs to convey. After he has spent some time in the wrestling sector, his defiant tone illustrates his distress at the physicality of the experience and his discovery that he has something of an aptitude for it: I suppose this is what you wanted, so don't go bawling your eyes out. I just want you to know that things are happening here. Changes by the hour, and you might not recognize your baby. Remember you told me not to get in any fights? I fight every single day. So what do you think of that? Several times a day. And I'm enjoying it.

And when he finally finds his true calling in the Arts Sector, he composes—as a jubilant demonstration of creative energy—a limerick: Whole new me, volume eighty-seven.

There once was a boy from Massachusetts/ Whose mother thought him dumb fat and useless/ She threw him a bone/ Ninety miles from home/ And today he was slotted with fruitses.

The pleasure he has in his situation is characteristically framed in terms of his usual self-mocking, linguistically supple but ultimately revealing style.

Themes and Characters

Lynch's primary subject in Slot Machine is social pressure that compels people to conform to a prescribed mode of behavior and the tendency to categorize. "People will always have an interest in labeling," he has observed. "It's not necessarily malicious, it's just a way of managing the world. It helps the world deal with the individual." And then, indicating his own strong feeling about this phenomenon, he adds, "But it does nothing for the individual." The characters in Slot Machine are part of a well-organized effort to begin the process of labeling at a time when they are or should be in the midst of exploring and constructing an individual identity in an attempt "to be more than the label says." Although he is sympathetic about their predicament, Lynch presents and measures them in terms of how much they have given in to the process, how much they are aware of its dangers and how effectively they can resist it. At one end of the spectrum, essentially as a backdrop of menace, Lynch sketches the athletes who have totally bought into the system, assuming that their athletic skills will give them a position of privilege. The teachers who support the system, epitomized by the manipulative Brother Jackson, the Dean of Men who is "in charge of the school," and the coaches who thrive in it, are older versions of the athletes, somewhat cliched expressions of sport twisted toward schemes of power and control. Toward the center of the spectrum, Lynch locates athletes who have a genuine feeling for their sport, but who have lost any perspective beyond it in their submission to the demands of the coaches. Further along, there are people like Thor, Elvin's bunk counsellor, who is going along with the system but who is intelligent and aware enough to understand its perils and who works subtly to help Elvin accommodate to its requirements. Toward the opposite end of the continuum are the rebels who are Lynch's heroes—sensitive and quick-witted Brothers subverting the power-freaks, and Elvin's peers .. . the so-called "misfits" who, whether they have any athletic ability or not, are much more interested in artistic, creative endeavors. These people are characterized by sharp wit, self-perception, idiosyncratic style, and an acceptance of diversity, with the latent potential to mature into eccentrics, cranks, mavericks, and other folks who hear the beat of a different drummer. Lynch does not develop them in depth, but gives them plausibility through the use of individual patterns of speech, one of his real strengths as a writer.

Elvin and his two friends Mikie and Frank are the central characters in the narrative. They have formed a tight bond of understanding prior to the camp session and in spite of real differences in their personalities and outlooks, they see themselves, correctly, as three fellow musketeers. Mikie is very level-headed, very competent, good at everything, a sort of surrogate big brother to Elvin, who calls him "Dad" somewhat facetiously but not inaccurately. Frankie is handsome and suave and very aware of it. Elvin sees him as slotted for "Big persona" and appreciates Frankie's efforts to protect him when he is made fun of and to guide him toward socially sanctioned styles of presentation. Frankie, though, is so determined to join the seniors who are acknowledged as school stars, that he submits to a hazing ritual that is degrading and senseless. At the end of the book, he has been shaken up but probably not damaged. Whether he can regain his self-confidence without becoming more like his tormentors,

whether he has become more sympathetic to those less obviously gifted, is an interesting open question. Elvin's friendship is a key element here as Frankie is the one in need now. Mikie and Frankie are convincing and distinctive characters in their own right but they are never seen independent of Elvin's narrative, nor are Elvin's and Mikie's mothers, who make a brief but memorable appearance at Parents' Weekend. Their amusement at the male rites of the camp offers a satirical comment on the social setup.

Elvin is the narrative consciousness of the novel and its presiding presence. It is his story and Lynch presents it from within Elvin's mind in a kind of conversational present as if Elvin were describing his thoughts, and his responses and reactions to events as they are occurring. This method works very well since Elvin is both immediately appealing and consistently interesting, his physical and social awkwardness balanced by his incisive wit, self-aware-ness, pluck and depth. He is very close to his mother—a single parent (with no information provided about their past) who, it seems, has probably been the audience for Elvin's extensive monologues. Consequently, he is accustomed to a sympathetic listener, which accounts for his total frankness about his feelings. He would rather hang around his house during the summer, but his mother has wisely recognized the necessity of getting him out of his comfort zone so that the transition to high school might not be totally devastating for him. As the always sensible Mikie observes when Elvin complains (as he often does) about their prospects, "Come on, El, what would we be doing anyway? Sitting around staring at each other all through July like we did last summer and the eight summers before that?" The difficulty is that Elvin is overweight, inner-directed, inept (so far) at sports and socially uneasy, and the decision to send him to the camp connected to the high school he is about to enter ("The flagship Christian Brothers Academy of the entire East Coast" the brochure boasts) would seem likely to compound all of his problems. The camp, however, is something of a mirror of society at large, and Elvin's comment on the concept of "slots"—"the whole slotting thing was degrading, and .. . I had a lot of unslottable intangibles to contribute to the school"—is approximately the way he feels about the world around him. He is already sure that he will always be out of step with most common prevailing social patterns, but he has not a clue about how he will work his way through this situation. Retreat and avoidance will lead to paranoia and self-pity, and his mother knows this. Beyond the boisterous buffoons establishing the social norms of the camp, there are men with real lessons to impart and hidden treasures (like the library and the Arts Sector) for Elvin to discover. Without working through the incidents of physical distress and emotional unease, Elvin is not going to be able to understand and appreciate the things that are worthwhile for him. During the three weeks he spends at the camp (which Lynch extrapolated from "something similar to this in my freshman year, except that my camp was only overnight, not three weeks"), Elvin makes some hard adjustments to his own perceived limits while learning that they are not as limiting as he previously believed, returning home clearly more confident, more mature, and much better prepared for the adventures and possibilities of life at high school.

Topics for Discussion

1. How effectively does Lynch present the athletic sectors of the camp? Does he give too negative a picture of sports like football, baseball, and wrestling? 2. Are their any positive elements of the camp's philosophy?

3. Are the characters meant to be villains given a human dimension or are they just stick figures easily dismissed? 4. Is Mikie a plausible character or are his competence and composure unrealistic? 5. Does Lynch generate any sympathy for Frankie or is his ordeal meant to be a fitting comedown for an overblown estimate of self-worth? 6. Consider any one of Elvin's letters and identify the kind of persona Elvin is emulating. 7. From the available information, develop a character description of one of the important but briefly seen characters like Thor, Elvin's mother, Mikie's mother or one of the sharp Brothers in the Arts Sector. 8. Note the contrasts in tone between Elvin's letters and try to read several of them in a voice that captures their particular mood. 9. Is the reading audience for Slot Machine exclusively male? 10. How well has Lynch succeeded in his intention to "make noise and be relevant and catch momentarily the attention of what seems to be a neglected reading group?"

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Locate and explain the cultural references in Elvin's letters and show how they are related to the themes of the book and the development of Elvin's character. 2. Slot Machine is set at a Christian Brothers Academy retreat. In light of Lynch's observation that he has "decidedly no affiliation" with respect to religion, how does he approach the question of religious instruction at the camp?

3. If Slot Machine were to be made into a film, who would you suggest play the characters? Explain and support your choices. 4. Elvin is impressed with a book he finds in the library which attempts to provide instruction for a wrestler. Compile a list of books written to the purpose of introducing a discipline and note some of the common aspects of these books in terms of their approach. 5. Two of the books that Elvin is introduced to are Emily Dickinson's poetry and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. Why does Elvin not respond favorably to Dickinson while finding Anderson captivating? 6. Discuss the comic effects and techniques of humor in Slot Machine. Do any of these have a parallel in the styles of contemporary comedians? 7. A review of Slot Machine asserts that it speaks "to the victim and outsider in us all." What other books designed for a young adult audience also address this condition of existence?

For Further Reference

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Lynch, Chris. "On a Constituency." In Literature for Today's Young Adults. Edited by Kenneth L. Donelson and Aileen Pace Nilsen. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997, p. 100. An excellent statement of Lynch's credo as an artist.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review of Slot Machine. Booklist September 1, 1995: 74. An incisive review that identifies and explains how Lynch coordinates the novel's different elements.

Related Titles/Adaptations

When he observed that "Elvin's voice more closely represents the way I talk than the other narrators," Lynch added, "I'm going to do more with Elvin as a narrator." In March of 1999, he published Extreme Elvin, following Elvin and his close friends Mike and Frankie into the first year of high school. Still affected by various physical afflictions (hemorrhoids and hormones), Elvin is as self-aware and amusing as he was in Slot Machine as he tries to cope with peer pressure and his first social encounters with the young women at the school. Elvin's mother has a larger role in this book, and the somewhat downbeat but not depressing ending indicate that further accounts of Elvin's teen years are a likely possibility.

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