Someone to Talk To Study Guide

Someone to Talk To by Deborah Eisenberg

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Introduction

Deborah Eisenberg's □Someone to Talk To□ first appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine on September 27, 1993. Four years later, it was included in her fourth collection of short stories, entitled *All Around Atlantis*. The story chronicles the journey of concert pianist Aaron Shapiro, fresh from a breakup with his longtime girlfriend, to an unspecified Latin American country where he is scheduled to perform his first concert in many years. When he arrives, he learns that the concert promoters are affiliated with the oppressive military regime that is currently in power.

Deborah Eisenberg traveled extensively throughout Central America in the 1980s, and several of her short stories are set in this region, exploring themes of oppression, persecution, and the indifference that allows these things to continue. The relationship between the powerful and the powerless is examined through the eyes of Shapiro, who is powerless himself, unable to halt the downward spiral of his career or the failure of his relationship.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Jewish

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1945

Deborah Eisenberg was born in Chicago, Illinois, on November 20, 1945. She grew up in Winnetka, a middle-class Chicago suburb. Her father, George, was a pediatrician, and her mother, Ruth, was a housewife. As one of the few Jewish students at her school, wearing a full-torso brace to correct her scoliosis, Eisenberg was a misfit and, according to Dinitia Smith, a self-admitted □behavior problem.□ Her parents responded by sending her to boarding school in Vermont in the early 1960s. Afterwards, she stayed on in Vermont to attend Marlboro College, studying Latin and Greek. Then Eisenberg left Vermont for New York City, where she earned a B.A. at the New School for Social Research in 1968.

Eisenberg worked in New York for seven years as a secretary and waitress before she became a writer. It was during this time that she met actor Wallace Shawn, whose father was then the editor of the *New Yorker*. They fell in love, and Shawn encouraged her to begin writing. At first, she concentrated on writing for the stage; her play, *Pastorale*, was produced by the Second Stage Theatre in 1981. In the mid-1980s, Eisenberg traveled throughout Latin America, an experience that influenced her work for years to come. She claims to have traveled to every country in Central America except Costa Rica and Belize. These were turbulent political times in Latin America, and Eisenberg witnessed firsthand the stark contrast between the privileged classes and the oppressed native peoples, a contrast that features prominently in many of her stories, including □Someone to Talk To.□

Transactions in a Foreign Currency, Eisenberg's first collection of short stories, was published in 1986, earning many favorable reviews. The title story won Eisenberg the first of her four O. Henry Awards. In 1987, she received the PEN Hemingway Citation, the Mrs. Giles Foundation Award, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the Whiting Foundation Award. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, she also spent several years teaching, first at Washington University in St. Louis and later at the University of Iowa, as part of the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

In 1992, Eisenberg published her second short-story collection, *Under the 82nd Airborne*. Though some critics felt it lacked the intensity of her first collection, this new volume garnered Eisenberg more awards; in 1993, she was given the Friends of American Writers Award, the Ingram-Merrill Foundation Grant, and the Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

During the mid-1990s, Eisenberg continued to teach, both at the City College of New York and New York University. In 1997, her first two collections were re-released in one

volume, entitled *The Stories (So Far) of Deborah Eisenberg*. Later the same year, she published a new collection, entitled *All Around Atlantis*, in which the story □Someone to Talk To□ appeared. Many critics considered this collection to be her best yet, and the stories □Across the Lake□ and □Mermaids□ were both O. Henry Award winners (in 1995 and 1997, respectively).

In 1999, Eisenberg took on a new role: actress. She appeared in the play □The Designated Mourner,□ written by her longtime companion, Wallace Shawn. She did not abandon writing for acting, however. In 2000, she won the Rea Award for the Short Story, and in 2002, her story □Like It or Not□ won her yet another O. Henry Award. In January 2006, she released her fifth collection of stories, *Twilight of the Superheroes*, which includes □Like It or Not□ and a story entitled □Some Other, Better Otto,□ which was originally published in the *Yale Review* and chosen for *Best American Short Stories 2004*.

As of 2006, Eisenberg was continuing to write and was teaching writing each fall at the University of Virginia. When she was not teaching in Virginia, she was living in Manhattan with Wallace Shawn.

Plot Summary

The story begins as Caroline, Aaron Shapiro's live-in girlfriend of six years, is leaving him for another man (identified only as □Jim□). She leaves him with both a broken heart and her cat, ironically named Lady Chatterley (□Jim, evidently, was allergic□). As she walks out the door, she tells Aaron, □I'll always care about you, you know.□

In the next scene, Aaron wakes up in a shabby hotel somewhere in Latin America, and as he reminisces about his relationship with Caroline, the reader learns that Aaron is a concert pianist who was once hailed as a star on the rise, but lately he has been forced to make ends meet by giving piano lessons to □startlingly untalented children.□ Shapiro's growing depression over his failing career (and the related financial difficulties) gradually eroded his relationship with Caroline, whose privileged background made it difficult for her to understand Shapiro's anxieties about money. Ironically, it was when the relationship was already damaged beyond repair that Shapiro received an invitation to play his first big concert in years in Latin America. (The country is not specified but bears a strong resemblance to Guatemala.)

Still reeling from Caroline's departure, Aaron leaves his tiny hotel room and heads to the hotel restaurant to meet with Richard Penwad, a representative of the group staging the concert. Pompous and elitist, Penwad is clearly uncomfortable in Shapiro's presence, as though he considers him one of the lower classes, like the ragged, emaciated native Indians who wait on them in the restaurant. During his conversation with Penwad, Aaron learns that the group sponsoring the concert is affiliated with the military government in power, the same government that has brutally oppressed and persecuted these native people. Uncomfortable with this knowledge, Shapiro reminds himself of his money woes: □Fee plus lessons, minus rent, minus utilities.□

After breakfast, Penwad drives Aaron to the Arts Center for rehearsal. As the orchestra begins to play, Shapiro is horrified; □the sound was so peculiar that he feared he was suffering from some neurological damage.□ However, once Aaron himself begins to play, he realizes the problem is the acoustics of the concert hall. He struggles with the concerto, a piece written by a Latin American composer; Shapiro had premiered the concerto himself seventeen years earlier at the height of his career.

After the discomfiting rehearsal, Shapiro proceeds to an interview (arranged by Penwad) with an English journalist named Beale. He meets Beale at a large, ostentatious hotel where, Shapiro realizes, □they'd put an *important* musician.□ Beale is an odd-looking character, described as having a spaceship-shaped head, wearing a stain-spattered suit and a tie made of rope. Though he is supposed to be interviewing Shapiro, he does most of the talking himself, espousing his personal theories on a variety of topics, most notably the beauty of the country and the tragedy of what has happened to the native Indians. He gets increasingly drunk throughout the □interview□; at one point, he implies that Shapiro is gay, and at another, he takes him to task for being American: □Dare I mention whose country it was that killed *all* their Indians?□

Beale is so insufferable that Shapiro excuses himself to use the phone, just to get away from him. When he returns to the table, he finds Beale speaking urgently into his tape recorder; when Shapiro arrives, he turns it off □with a bright smile, as though he'd been apprehended in some mild debauchery.□ With Aaron back at the table, Beale continues his monologue, this time waxing rhapsodic over the wonders of radio: □You haven't a friend in the world, then you turn on the radio, and someone's talking to *you*.□

Though the pompous Penwad and his wife are scheduled to pick him up and show him around the next morning, Shapiro slips out early to avoid them and see the city himself. He wanders through the grand neighborhoods of the wealthy and then through poor parts of the city where the starving and destitute live on the streets. He is reminded of the homeless in the city where he lives, who terrify him. The more he struggles to pay his bills, the less unimaginable their plight appears. He searches their faces □for proof that each was in some reliable way different from him.□

As he continues his walk, he thinks of Caroline, who would choose to simply ignore the existence of such people. Finally, he stops at a small restaurant for a bowl of soup. At the next table are three large men all carrying pistols. When they see Shapiro staring at them, one of the men reaches up and unscrews the light bulb from the lamp over their table.

Later that evening, Shapiro performs the concerto at the acoustically challenged hall. When he had performed the piece seventeen years earlier, his performance was described as □*affirming*.□ Now, in this hall, though he does his best, □it had simply sat over them all□a great, indestructible, affirming block of suet.□

Outside the hall after the concert, Penwad and his wife approach Aaron and point out notable dignitaries and other members of elite society, including the woman who is hosting a reception for Shapiro at her home that evening. Her haughty son stops to talk to Shapiro, and in the midst of their conversation, the journalist Beale approaches, sloppily eating an orange. He apologizes to Shapiro for getting drunk during their interview. The pompous youth with whom Shapiro has been talking makes a rude comment, indicating that Beale is not welcome at the reception. Shapiro is appalled, and Beale is livid, calling the boy a □Little putrid viper.□ Joan, Penwad's snobbish wife, beckons to Shapiro, saying it is time to leave for the reception. He joins her, but before he leaves, he wants to find Beale, feeling bad for him. He searches and finally locates him, □crouched in the corner of a concrete trough that must have been intended as some sort of reflecting pool.□ He is talking into his tape recorder, describing the elegant party to which he has not been invited. He speaks tenderly, almost as if talking to a lover, describing the Indian children of the servants playing a game near the fountain and reminiscing about the beauty of the country before the war. Finally, he puts the tape recorder behind his head like a pillow, and stretches out in the trough for a nap. The last thing he tells the recorder is, □everyone has something, some little thing, my darling, they've been waiting so long to tell you.□

Characters

Beale

Beale is the English radio journalist who interviews Shapiro. Actually, he does very little interviewing and spends most of the time voicing his own opinions. Though at first Beale appears to be a minor character, the author uses him as a spokesperson for her views on the oppression of the native people and the beauty of the country. By having these weighty themes voiced by such an odd, buffoonish character, Eisenberg is able to avoid sounding pedantic.

Psychologically, Beale appears to be a bit unstable. He rambles uncontrollably, drinks too much, and holds tender, clandestine conversations with his tape recorder. At the interview lunch with Shapiro, Beale wears a □tie that appeared to be made of rope,□ a noose-like image that adds to his unhinged persona. Yet it is Beale who gives the story its title: he is so desperate for □someone to talk to,□ he has invented his own listener. This basic human need, the need to be heard, is an important theme in the story.

Caroline

Aaron Shapiro's longtime girlfriend, Caroline, who leaves him in the opening scene, represents the kind of benign indifference often shown to the oppressed and suffering in this story. As Eisenberg describes her: □She despised no one. Those who were not nice, pleasant, happy simply ceased to exist.□ Not surprisingly, as Aaron's star began to fade and he became troubled and depressed, Caroline became uncomfortable. Rather than real empathy, she offered Aaron empty platitudes, such as □Things will work out,□ and □Something will turn up.□

Caroline comes from a privileged background, and her attitude matches that of the wealthy patrons of the arts who attend Shapiro's concert. They live in grand mansions just moments away from the neighborhoods of native Indians who are starving and destitute. They ignore the plight of these people because they are not pleasant or happy.

Umberto García-Gutiérrez

García-Gutiérrez, a fictional Latin-American composer, wrote the concerto Shapiro performs at the concert. He is a □great tree of a man,□ powerful and imposing. He is also apparently gay and interested in Shapiro. The fact that Shapiro premiered García-Gutiérrez's concerto seventeen years earlier, when his star was still on the rise, drives home the vast difference between Shapiro's career now and his career then.

Native Indians

The native peoples of this country, who have been oppressed, tortured, and massacred by the government, are a constant presence in the story. Ironically, the only person in the story who refers to them directly is Beale. When Shapiro notices the □fuming slums□ while surveying the landscape with Penwad, Penwad blames the conditions on a recent earthquake then quickly turns the conversation back to the architecture of the Center for the Arts, which □survived intact.□ Penwad's wife, Joan, appears to be repulsed by the Indians, yet she is eager to show Shapiro the city's Institute of Indigenous Textiles.

Joan Penwad

Richard Penwad's snobbish wife, Joan, is more openly derisive towards the native Indians than her husband; when Richard mentions that they left Shapiro messages at the desk of his hotel, Joan excuses Shapiro by commenting, □Well . . . those *people* at the desk.□ Apparently unaware of her own hypocrisy, she is enthusiastic about the Institute of Indigenous Textiles and the □cross-fertilization□ of native and modern motifs in the work of local architect Santiago Mendez.

Richard Penwad

Penwad is the pompous representative of the group sponsoring Shapiro's concert. He carefully avoids any mention of the native Indians or what is happening in the country. He seems wary of Shapiro as well; he grimaces when Shapiro shakes his hand and afterward □glanced at his palm,□ as if Shapiro might pass on some sort of contaminant.

There are hints that Penwad is a bit dominated by his wife; he voices her opinions of the center's architecture, rather than his own, and when offering to show Shapiro the area, he says, □Joan has her own ideas, but you must say what interests *you*.□ He does not offer any suggestions of his own.

Aaron Shapiro

Aaron Shapiro, the story's main character, is a concert pianist who once was considered a star on the rise; however, this potential was never realized. His career peaked in his twenties, and now he frets constantly about paying his bills, going over figures in his head: □Rent, plus utilities, plus insurance, minus lessons, plus food.□

Though the reader is privy to Aaron's thoughts and emotions, he says very little throughout the story. He is continually interrupted or overshadowed by the words of those around him□the verbose Beale, pompous Richard Penwad and his wife, even the haughty son of his hostess. He talks to Caroline, but to no avail; □If he spoke truthfully to her, she couldn't hear him.□ Even when he has an opportunity to speak, he is unable

to seize it. When Beale stops talking for a rare moment during their interview, Shapiro opened his mouth; a blob of sound came out. Though to Penwad and others in the story the lines between classes are distinctly drawn, Shapiro has begun to realize how little separates him from the homeless people on the street, and it terrifies him.

Themes

Loneliness and the Need to Be Heard

The main character of □Someone to Talk To,□ Aaron Shapiro, is coping with the departure of his live-in girlfriend of six years. In addition, he is far from home, in an unfamiliar country torn by years of civil war. As the story progresses and the reader learns more of Aaron's history, it becomes clear that even when Caroline was still living with him, he was dealing with loneliness of a different form□the loneliness of not being heard or understood. Caroline did not want to hear anything from Aaron that contradicted her view of the world as a happy, benign place where troubles are temporary and easily remedied.

To compound this sense of isolation and impotence, not a single character in the story really listens to Aaron Shapiro. Penwad and his wife are too wrapped up in themselves to care, especially since they consider Shapiro to be beneath them, socially. Ironically, Beale is so consumed by his own need to be heard and understood that he talks almost incessantly, leaving Shapiro few opportunities to speak at all. The reader gets a sense of Beale's lonely childhood from the speech he makes about the wonders of radio: □It's raining outside, your mum's still working in the shop, you haven't a friend in the world, then you turn on the radio, and someone's talking□to *you*.□ Perhaps this is why Shapiro feels sympathetic towards Beale at the end of the story, when Beale is insulted by the haughty young man at the concert; Shapiro recognizes that he and Beale are searching for the same thing: someone to talk to, someone who will actually listen and understand.

Shapiro is even thwarted when he attempts to express himself through his music. The acoustics of the hall are so poor that the sound □sloshed and bulged, gummed up in clumps, liquefied, as though the air were full of whirling blades.□

On a larger scale, the persecuted native peoples of this country are also without a voice. As Shapiro walks through the poor neighborhoods of these people, they are described as □People who were almost invisible, almost inaudible. People to whom almost anything could be done: *other* people.□ Their cries for help are unheeded by the wealthy elite, who choose, as Caroline would, to ignore them and their unhappy, unpleasant situation.

Indifference

The attitude that Caroline takes towards Aaron's despair is similar to the attitude that the wealthy elite takes towards the poor and suffering in their country. Caroline is described as being □deeply sympathetic with, and at the same time deeply insensitive to, the distress of others.□ In the same way, the wealthy people here employ the native people as servants, admire their art and textiles in museums, and yet choose to ignore their desperate living conditions and starving children. Even Beale, who laments the plight of

the native Indians at length, does not mention any plans or theories for improving the situation.

On a more political scale, this criticism is extended to the United States. First, Beale makes his comment about how Americans killed *all* their Indians. Secondly, if readers assume that the country in this story is Guatemala, much of the suffering in that country was aggravated by the aggressive U.S. support of any non-communist government that sought power. In an effort to keep communism off America's doorstep, the United States aided ruthless political groups that persecuted, tortured, and murdered thousands and thousands of native Indians from the 1950s through the 1980s. Yet few Americans were aware of or interested in the situation. As Eisenberg says in an interview included in the paperback version of *All Around Atlantis*, In what way can we be said to 'not know' or 'not understand' certain things that are happening very much within the compass of information available to us?

Class Distinctions

Within the story, there are definite distinctions between classes of people. At the top are wealthy elite who support the arts, such as Penwad and his wife, and the hostess of Shapiro's reception. Penwad's discomfort in dealing with Shapiro indicates that he considers him a step below him on the class scale, perhaps because Shapiro is Jewish, or simply because he is a musician, and not a particularly prominent one. Beale, with his odd way of dressing and his slovenly manners, is clearly lower on the scale than Shapiro, so low that even the son of Shapiro's hostess has no qualms about insulting him to his face. At the very bottom of the scale are the native Indians, whom the elite consider so insignificant they never even mention them directly, even though they encounter them often as servants. Only Joan refers to them at all, and she calls them those *people*.

Shapiro realizes where he stands with the elite group; after the concert when Joan summons him to leave for the reception, tugging the lapel of his tuxedo, he reflects that He might just as well be wearing grease-stained overalls with his name embroidered on the pocket. To them, he is an employee, one more servant, summoned for their amusement.

Even the locations where people live are arranged according to class, from lowest to highest. Down at the bottom are the ravines, encrusted with fuming slums, where the native peoples live. Further up on the hills are the homes of people like Penwad and his wife, and then, highest on the slope is the Gold Zone, where the most powerful and wealthy reside.

Style

Point of View

□Someone to Talk To□ is written in the third person limited omniscient; however, because the reader has access to only Aaron Shapiro's thoughts and emotions, and no one else's, the effect is similar to that of a first-person narrative. This is important, because otherwise readers would not experience the psychological upheaval that Aaron is going through, thrown from an emotionally jarring situation□his breakup with Caroline□straight into the physical and mental disorientation of traveling to a foreign country. For example, Aaron's performance at the concert is satisfactory□the composer himself commends Aaron afterwards□but to Aaron it is all a confusing blur: □Shapiro felt as though he'd awakened to find himself squatting naked in a glade, blinking up at a chortling TV crew that had just filmed him gnawing a huge bone. Had he played well or badly? He hardly knew.□ Similarly, when he is sitting in the small restaurant after walking through the poor neighborhoods of the Indians, he falls into a reverie and sees Caroline in his mind's eye. He says, □Caroline,□ but afterward, he is unsure whether he has actually spoken the name aloud or just thought it. Because only Aaron's thoughts are expressed, the reader experiences the same uncertainty.

Setting

The Latin American country to which Aaron travels figures prominently in the story. In particular, seeing the abject poverty of the native Indians forces Aaron to confront his own terror about his failing career and precarious finances and to realize the fine line between □ordinary□ people like him and the homeless people camped out near his own home in the city. Moreover, he realizes that in the minds of the wealthy snobs who have hired him, that line is even finer, in terms of class distinction.

The beauty of the countryside provides a stark contrast to what is happening to its native people. Though Eisenberg uses few words to describe the landscape, more than one character refers to its beauty. When Shapiro takes his long walk through the city, he notes that □beyond the surrounding slopes lay the countryside□the gorgeous, blood-drenched countryside.□ Later, the hostess of Shapiro's reception is described as having a □blood-red mouth,□ linking her and the other wealthy concert goers to the war and strife brought about by the oppressive government.

Travel is a common theme in Eisenberg's work, often throwing her characters off-balance. In a 1992 interview in the *New York Times Book Review*, Eisenberg describes this disorientation: □The thing that guides you in the ordinary round of your day is not there□the stability that carries you from one moment to the next is gone.□ This disruption underscores the unsettled and vulnerable feelings of people who are financially at risk or who have been financially stable and now experience abject poverty because of an oppressive governmental takeover.

Humor

Though □Someone to Talk To□ is by no means a comedy, Eisenberg uses humor throughout to leaven its weighty themes. Sometimes the humor is more subtle, as in her wry description of Shapiro's piano students: □startlingly untalented children who at best thought of the piano as a defective substitute for something electronic.□ In her description of the relentlessly chipper Caroline, she writes, □He'd once overheard her saying thank you to a recorded message.□ Later, Eisenberg describes Shapiro's performance of the concerto, once hailed as □affirming,□ as □a great, indestructible, affirming block of suet.□

Not all of the humor is couched in descriptive passages, however. The interview with Beale contains moments broad enough for vaudeville, such as when Beale takes offense at Shapiro's question regarding how dangerous the country is:

□I mean, this place is hardly in the league of□I mean, one's forever reading, isn't one? How some poor tourist? Who's saved his pennies for years and years and years. Who then *goes* to New York, to see a show on your great Broad*way*, and virtually the instant he arrives gets stabbed in the . . .□ He took a violent gulp of his drink. □The□□

□Liver,□ Shapiro said.

□*Sub*way,□ Beale said.

The humor with which Eisenberg describes Beale and his behavior, and his rambling, loony way of talking, allows her to give Beale the task of voicing some serious themes□persecution of the Indians, for example□without dragging the story down.

Tone

Critics have commented on the dreamlike quality of Eisenberg's stories. In □Someone to Talk To,□ Aaron Shapiro literally dreams his way through much of the story, due to his preoccupation with Caroline and their breakup. He frequently falls into reveries about their days together. Eisenberg uses language that accentuates his dreamlike state: □The night had been crowded with Caroline and endless versions of her departure□dreamed, reversed in dreams, modified, amended, transfigured, made tender and transcendently beautiful as though it had been an act of sacral purification.□ Later, when he escapes to a phone booth for a few moments away from the journalist Beale, Eisenberg writes, □Shapiro sat down inside it, shutting himself into an oceanic silence. Beyond the glass wall people floated by□huge, serene, assured, like exhibits.□ This distorted, surreal feeling is common in Eisenberg's work. In a review of *Under the 82nd Airborne* in the *New York Times Book Review*, reviewer Gary Krist writes that □the overall atmosphere of beleaguered disorientation□ is an □Eisenberg trademark.□

Historical Context

Guatemala

Though other Central American governments have mounted violent counterinsurgency campaigns, the description of the Indians' persecution in □Someone to Talk To□ bears a strong resemblance to the history of Guatemala in the 1980s. Though the Guatemalan army had used death squads to quash insurgents since the 1960s, the slaughter of political dissidents and their alleged supporters reached a bloody peak in the early 1980s, due in part to the strong support of the Reagan administration. In 1983, Reagan lifted an earlier ban on military aid to Guatemala. The United States provided the Guatemalan army with millions of dollars' worth of military assistance, including trucks, jeeps, and aircraft parts, all in an effort to keep communism out of Central America. (Interestingly, it was also Reagan who helped bring about the end of the cold war later in the 1980s, rendering such precautions obsolete.)

The Guatemalan army was quick to label citizens as insurgents; in many cases poor native Indians were simply assumed to be supporters of the Guerilla Army of the Poor (known as the EGP) without proof or investigation, and hundreds of Mayan villages were systematically destroyed. Thousands of Indians were killed, but some managed to escape to the hills, homeless.

The true extent of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan army, and the complicity of the U.S. government, did not become known to the general American public until the late 1990s, when the Clinton administration declassified a large number of secret documents pertaining to this sad chapter in Guatemalan and U.S. history.

Homelessness in America

An economic recession in the early 1980s, plus large cuts in funding for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), precipitated a huge increase in the number of homeless people during the 1980s. The rise of crack cocaine, a much cheaper form of the drug than had been available before, further aggravated the problem. Some estimates put the number of homeless during this time as high as two million. While the overall economy improved throughout the 1980s, homelessness remained a problem.

The problem of homelessness was set in sharper relief by the growing gap between the richest and poorest Americans. After the Reagan administration took office in 1981, it relaxed government regulations and taxes for big business, which led to a boom for large corporations. Coupled with the aforementioned cuts made in social programs, the result was that the rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. The social activism of the 1960s had been largely abandoned during the 1970s (dubbed the □Me Decade□ by author Tom Wolfe), and this trend continued into the 1980s. Americans became less interested in the ills of society and more focused on their personal ambition and

financial success. Consumption of luxury items increased, conspicuous symbols of their owner's success. This attitude was summed up by the evil Gordon Gecko, a character in the popular 1987 movie *Wall Street*: □Greed is good.□

Critical Overview

All Around Atlantis, the short-story collection in which □Someone to Talk To□ appears, was critically well-received. Two of the stories from the collection, □Across the Lake□ and □Mermaids,□ won O. Henry Awards. □Someone to Talk To,□ though not considered the best story of the collection by many critics, was occasionally mentioned in reviews. A reviewer from *Kirkus Reviews* calls the story □superb,□ and R. Z. Sheppard, in a review for *Time* magazine, specifically praises the character Beale: □In 'Someone to Talk To,' a journalist who won't stop gabbing about himself long enough to ask a question is worthy of Evelyn Waugh.□ Gail Caldwell of the *Boston Globe*, however, felt that the three stories in the collection set in Central America □suffer from a pedantic overkill on the displaced-imperialist theme.□ Referring specifically to □Someone to Talk To,□ she writes, □I felt I was reading a workshop exercise by someone who loved Graham Greene, without being anything like Graham Greene.□ Jim Shepard of the *New York Times Book Review*, in an otherwise positive review of the collection, complains briefly of Eisenberg's □fondness for pointedly illuminating chance encounters with eccentrics, who through their ramblings focus the stories' themes while bringing the usually somewhat baffled protagonists up to speed.□ Though he does not mention the character Beale by name as one of these eccentrics, the description certainly fits.

Many reviews of the collection as a whole, however, were glowing. David Wiegand of the *San Francisco Chronicle* writes, □Deborah Eisenberg . . . seems incapable of writing a bad short story.□ Shepard affirms, □These stories are spirited and masterly road maps through sad and forbidding and desolate terrain.□ Eisenberg is known for her off-beat characters, and reviewers often praised her skill in making them both believable and sympathetic. As Wiegand puts it, □So skilled is Eisenberg at developing these characters as engagingly 'ordinary' that we find ourselves identifying with them without realizing how we got there.□ Caldwell of the *Boston Globe* agrees: □Much of the emotional weight and delivery of Eisenberg's stories owes a debt to her characters. . . . people just two inches weirder than the strange guy next door, or slightly more lunatic than all of us know ourselves to be.□

Eisenberg began her writing career as a playwright, and this is most noticeable in her deft handling of dialogue. Her characters speak in short, pithy fragments, pausing to grope for words, sometimes changing subjects in mid-thought, just as people do in real life. As Wendy Brandmark writes in her review of *All Around Atlantis* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, □Her characters speak with the cut and thrust of a taut screenplay; yet they sound completely natural and real.□ Caldwell says in her review, □The dialogue, reflecting those early dramatist's skills, is crisp and revelatory.□

All Around Atlantis, which was released in 1997, was considered by many critics to be Eisenberg's best collection yet. After that she continued to write award-winning short stories, and in 2006, she released another collection entitled *Twilight of the Superheroes*.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a B.A. from the University of Michigan and twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In this essay, Pryor compares the characters Aaron Shapiro and Beale regarding how they communicate with others.

Aaron Shapiro, the protagonist of □Someone To Talk To,□ has a communication problem. From the opening of the story□an awkward farewell with his longtime girlfriend□to the final scenes of the story outside the concert hall, Shapiro is alternately unable to communicate or prohibited from communicating. When in the course of the story, he is interviewed by a journalist who cannot stop talking, Shapiro's inability to speak up is dramatized literally. In fact, through juxtaposition with Beale, the journalist, Aaron Shapiro's sense of being eclipsed becomes more obvious.

It begins with Caroline's departure. In the opening scene, Aaron is watching the woman with whom he has spent six years of his life walk out his door for the last time. In the entire scene of farewell, Aaron manages just ten words, two of which are spoken to the cat. As he reminisces about the downward spiral of their relationship, the reader learns that □Recently, he'd been silent for whole evenings.□ When Caroline would call him from work to say she would be late, □her words floated in the air like dying petals while he listened, reluctant to hang up but unable to think of anything to say.□ He finally lashes out at her and her hollow reassurances (□Things will work out□), the first honest communication of his feelings, but it comes out far more harshly than he intended: □Was that his voice? Were those his words? He could hardly believe it himself.□ Ironically, Caroline sounds the death knell for the relationship when she utters the words, □Listen Aaron. . . . We have to talk.□

Relocation to Latin America does nothing for Aaron's communication skills. To complicate matters, he finds himself surrounded by people who, like Caroline, really do not care for anything he has to say, unless it is complimentary and positive. Richard Penwad is so eager to be free of him altogether, that when he speaks of Aaron's departure, □he already, Shapiro noticed, looked relieved.□

Enter Beale, the English radio journalist. Beale is Shapiro's opposite in terms of communication; while his listening skills could use some improvement, he is never at a loss for words. He speaks almost incessantly throughout the interview with Aaron, who is hard-pressed to fill even the few brief gaps Beale allows him in the conversation. Even the physical description of Beale makes him sound like some sort of communication device: □Beale's head was an interesting space-ship shape. Colorless and sensitive-looking filaments sprouted from it, and his ears looked like receiving devices. Sensors, transmitters, Shapiro thought.□

Interestingly, Beale possesses something else that Shapiro seems to lack: passion. While one tends to think of concert pianists as people with a passion for, even obsession with, their art, Aaron is obsessed only with the money he is not making with

his career. Aaron enjoys playing the Garcia-Gutierrez concerto, but what he enjoys are □the athletic challenge of its surface complexities. . . . the response of the audience.□ Beale, on the other hand, is all passion and little reason, clearly unconcerned with appearances (as evidenced by his stained suit). He delights in the sensual: the food and drink at lunch with Shapiro cause him to burst into joyous little exclamations (□oh! . . . pork pie!□). He waxes poetic about the beauty of the country, its history, its people.

Shapiro's lack of passion is likely the cause of his stalled career. □The qualities he greatly admired and envied in other pianists□varieties of a profound musicianship which focussed the attention on the ear, hearing, rather than on the hand, executing□were ones he lacked.□ Diligent practice brings him □just the faintest flicker of heat in his crystalline touch.□ This flaw in his musicianship is, in its own way, one more failure to communicate, to command the attention of his audience and help them feel the music.

Though Shapiro seems deeply affected by Caroline's departure, his reveries about her are not those of a man passionately in love; he reflects more on her failings than her positive qualities. As with his career, he seems to be mourning the loss of the relationship not because he was so passionate about it, but simply for the status it brought him. Because Caroline was initially attracted to him because of the glamour of his ascending career, losing her is one more indication □that success, the sort of success Penwad's letter seemed to promise for him again, was something he could just, finally, forget about.□

Shapiro's choice of Caroline as a partner indicates that he is actually avoiding passion in his life. The descriptions of Caroline paint a picture of a woman who is delicate, frail, pale, and patrician, with a cool elegance about her. It is ironic that straight from his breakup with the icy Caroline, Shapiro travels to Latin America, a region known for the fire and passion of its people.

Many parallels can be drawn between Shapiro and the poor native Indians in the story. The Indians have no voice in the society in which they live; they have been silenced by the oppressive military regime in power. Just as the hall in which Shapiro plays□a hall built by the government in power□distorts and suppresses the music he performs, the government of this country has done everything in its power to prevent the rest of the world from hearing the full story of what has been done to these people. In addition, this is not the first time these people have been robbed of their voice; as Beale explains to Shapiro: □You know, the Indians here had simply everything at one time. A calendar. A written language□centuries, centuries, *centuries* before the Spanish came. . . . and the Spanish actually destroyed it all. . . . The written language was actually destroyed, do you see.□ Every attempt by the Indians to communicate their plight is thwarted, even in this description of the city on the night of the concert: □A slow continuous combustion of garbage sent up bulletins of ruin from the hut-blistered gorges, which were quickly snuffed out by the fragrance drifting from the garlanded slopes of the Gold Zone.□ The wealthy patrons of the arts follow Caroline's example, with a stubborn insistence that all is happy and pleasant and a determination to ignore any evidence to the contrary.

Though Shapiro is repulsed by Beale's slovenly manners and lack of tact, at the same time, he is drawn to him, perhaps fascinated by the ease with which Beale expresses himself, the stream-of-consciousness monologue he maintains almost continuously. Shapiro recognizes in Beale the passion for life that has eluded him in both his art and his relationships. As he listens to Beale speak into his tape recorder at the end of the story, he seems to experience, vicariously, the same sensations that Beale is experiencing: □Beale stretched himself out in the trough, tucking the tape recorder under his head like a pillow, and a delicious sensation of rest poured into Shapiro's body.□ Similarly, when Beale describes a scene from his imagination, Shapiro closes his eyes and experiences it himself: □Yes, he could hear it, the chatter, the pointless chatter. And smell the orange-scented garden.□ The reader begins to feel that with Beale as his coach, Shapiro could break out of the numb trance he has been wrapped in and experience the emotion and passion he has been avoiding for so many years.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on □Someone to Talk To,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Robinson is a former teacher of English literature and creative writing and, as of 2006, is a full-time writer and editor. In the following essay, Robinson examines how Eisenberg gives a voice to what is left unsaid in Someone to Talk To.

In her review of Deborah Eisenberg's *All Around Atlantis* in the *Houston Chronicle*, Paula Friedman writes that Eisenberg's □uncannily wise stories give haunting voice to what is often left painfully unsaid.□ Friedman's observation aptly describes the interactions between the characters in □Someone to Talk To.□

The opening scene sets the tone for the story. Aaron Shapiro's girlfriend Caroline is leaving him. In this potentially raw moment, the emotion is both unexpressed and displaced. Displacement is a psychological defense mechanism in which there is an unconscious shift of emotions from the original object to a more acceptable substitute. In this instance, the recipient of Aaron and Caroline's emotions is the cat. It is clear that Aaron still loves Caroline, as he is painfully aware of her fragrance and terrified of the possibility that she might touch him. But the two characters treat each other with excruciating politeness. Instead of touching each other, they touch the cat. Caroline asks the cat to take care of Aaron, a roundabout way of expressing her love for him and of acknowledging that she will not be taking care of Aaron herself. Though Aaron says that he will be fine, the fact that he feels the cat's leaning against his leg □thuggishly□ suggests that Caroline's leaving him is an onslaught against his feelings.

The description of Aaron seeing himself □as if in a dream, standing on a dark shore,□ suggests a state of shock (people suffering shock often find themselves standing outside their body) and of disorientation. He has reached the end of this piece of dry land but cannot see his way ahead. His desolation and disorientation is made concrete when in the next scene, he wakes in a country far away from Caroline, in an unfamiliar hotel room that □wobbled into place around him.□ The wobbling motion expresses his emotional state.

It becomes clear that Aaron has long been divorced from any real direction in life. His early virtuosity as a pianist depended on his technical ability, focusing the attention on the hand and the execution, rather than the ear and the hearing of the piece. He is present in body (to execute the piece) but not in soul (to breathe life into it). Aaron lacks vital heat in his cold, hard, □crystalline touch.□ His name, □once received like a slab of precious metal, was now received like a slip of blank paper□□another image suggestive of someone who is not vitally present.

Just as Aaron is disconnected from his music and from his early sense of purpose, so he fails to form a firm connection with Caroline. Even when the two met, they were at cross-purposes. She was starry-eyed at his apparently brilliant musicianship, unaware that he had already admitted defeat. He had moved to the margins of the city, symbolic of his abandonment of commitment to his role as a musician and of his alienation from the mainstream. As their relationship progressed, it was characterized not by increasing

connection, but by disconnection. She touched him less often, and he remained silent, worrying about finances.

In both speech and music, Aaron has nothing to say. He has become □exiled□ from □the bower of celebrity.□ The metaphor of exile is picked up in his later, literal exile to an unnamed Latin American country to play at a concert and in the British expatriate journalist, Beale, whom he meets there. Both Aaron and Beale are exiles in the sense that they are marginalized characters who do not belong. The question of whether either can still make any meaningful connection with the rest of the world is answered later.

Aaron's relationship with Caroline reaches a crisis when he challenges her reassuring platitudes that □Things will work out.□ Breaking his silence, Aaron replies harshly that things will undoubtedly work out, □for some other species. Or on some other planet.□ While Caroline has a bright outlook that springs from her idyllic childhood, Aaron has a darker outlook that Caroline cannot accept. Aaron's view is that □he, like most humans, was an experiment that had never been expected to succeed, a little padding around some evolutionary thrust, a scattershot nubbin of DNA.□ He feels that he, as an individual within the great scheme of things, does not matter. Life and evolution do matter, but he is irrelevant to both. In this most extreme disconnection, Aaron is divorced from life itself.

These disconnections foreshadow a major disconnection in the narrative, enacted in Aaron's visit to the Latin American country. The government of this country, in league with the U.S. Embassy, has invited him to play one of his signature pieces. Aaron, the innocent, believes he is simply going to play music. The truth turns out to be quite different.

In the hotel, Aaron meets Richard Penwad, the contact to whom he has been assigned. Eisenberg's description of the meeting is a satirical masterpiece, succeeding largely because of what is left unsaid. The change of setting reflects a widening of the story's focus. The disconnection previously explored on a personal level is expanded to the political, to show a disconnection between spin and reality.

Penwad explains that he and his fellow organizers of the music festival (an unidentified □we□) hope to attract more North American musicians and that Aaron is to play a piece by the composer García-Gutiérrez, who is being featured because he is local. Though Penwad does not say as much, his words show that the invitation to Aaron is not a recognition of his genius, but a political maneuver. The gap between political spin and reality is shown in the juxtaposition of the pictures of regal, smiling Indians on the hotel walls and the skinny, grief-raddled Indians working there as waiters. In addition, Aaron is aware that the country's Indians are being massacred by the government. Penwad says that he hopes □our□ sponsorship of the festival □will help to . . . rectify the, ah, perception that we're identified with the military here.□ In spite of this political doublespeak, Aaron suddenly realizes that he is here as part of a propaganda campaign on the part of the United States government and its client regime in this country. When Penwad asks who □we□ are, Penwad replies evasively but reveals that he is connected to the U.S. Embassy.

The very buildings in this country are the instruments of politicians in their attempts to control the populace. The Arts Center, far from being an organic expression of the people's love for the arts, is divorced from the people, to the extent that the taxi drivers do not know where it is. It is a crude defense against social breakdown imposed on the people by politicians, at a time when it was feared that increased leisure time and economic wealth would □cause humanity to devolve into a grunting mass sprawled in front of blood-drenched TV screens.□ In a satirical comment, Eisenberg points out that poverty accomplished this devolution by itself.

The Arts Center is a piece of political spin even in its design: Penwad praises it to Aaron for its □cross-fertilization□ of indigenous Indian and modernistic Western motifs. Such architectural symbolism implies that the two populations are happily integrated. But it is clear to Aaron that the Indians live in slums in ravines that have been hit by a recent earthquake, whereas the English-speaking community and the business center are safe in their own parts of town. The word □cross-fertilization□ gains a heavy ironic weight, reinforced by Aaron's baffled question, □Of what . . . does *Joan* . . . say 'cross-fertilization?'□ In the context of plant breeding, the word refers to sexual reproduction between different types of plants. In this city, cross-fertilization between the populations does not happen; ghettoization and segregation would be more accurate terms.

While the Indians suffer most in this region of dictatorships, the educated classes also live in fear. Part of what Penwad has avoided saying is conveyed in the picture of the members of the orchestra that accompanies Aaron. The musicians are of □startled appearance, as though a huge claw had snatched them from their beds and plonked them into their chairs.□ They are cowed victims, the prey of a predator. The Arts Center, in keeping with its history as an instrument of a tyrannical state, joins in the victimization process by means of its □demonic□ acoustics, which turn into □whirling blades.□ Aaron dislikes the concerto even as he is playing it, though the audience enjoys it because the fact that the composer is local makes them feel that their worth has been recognized. The scene reveals that art, far from being pure, has become corrupted by politics. Aaron was not invited as a musician, but as a propagandist; the audience are not there to enjoy music, but to feel affirmed.

Seemingly, the only chance Aaron has of boosting his battered self-image is the interview that Penwad has arranged with the British journalist Beale. The hotel where Aaron is to meet Beale is grander than the one in which Aaron has been installed, and in yet another humiliation, he notes that □this was where they'd put an *important* musician.□

In theory, the interview with Beale should provide Aaron with a chance to express what he has to say. But it transpires that listening to Aaron is low on Beale's list of priorities. His first priority is getting a free meal on expenses; his second is, as the story's title puts it, having someone to talk to. He talks so relentlessly about his own concerns that it does not occur to him to ask a question. Nevertheless, Beale's appearance□Eisenberg describes him as looking like a radio receiver□and the fact that he is a radio journalist alert the reader to the fact that Beale has absorbed information about his adopted country. He spends his interview time with Aaron revealing the sordid underside to the

spin and diplomacy of Penwad. In an ironic understatement, Beale says that this country is not a □favorable climate□ for the arts, as it is better at killing students than producing artists. Beale's obsession is the plight of the Indians, who had a sophisticated culture until the Spanish arrived and destroyed it. Indeed, the Spanish are still slaughtering the Indians, but news reports remain silent about it, so officially, the problem does not exist. Beale's fascination with the Indians led to his trying desperately to be posted to this country. In an instance of dramatic irony, Beale says, □fortunately, there were all these insurrections and whatnot, and that created demand, and so now I've been here over fifteen years!□ Unwittingly, he has become reliant on the oppressive regime that he hates. This is also the situation in which Aaron and García-Gutiérrez find themselves: shown off by the government as exhibits, they have been drafted into the ranks of the oppressors.

Beale causes a crisis in Aaron's soul when he almost says that the musician is the instrument of the composer. Before Beale can utter the word □instrument,□ Aaron rushes out and shuts himself into the merciful silence of a phone booth. The reader must fill in the blanks. Perhaps Aaron cannot bear to hear the full truth of what Beale is suggesting: that he is not only an instrument of the compromised government exhibit, García-Gutiérrez, but an instrument of the governments of the United States and the military regime in this country.

Beale, a prophet in spite of himself, unwittingly answers an unspoken question that tortures Aaron regarding his role as an artist. Unlike Aaron, who has come merely to regurgitate an empty piece of music that happens to be in his repertoire, Beale retains his sense of wonder, spontaneity, and love of communicating. His words concern radio, but they could equally apply to music:

Oh my darling! Someone is talking to you, and you don't know . . . what thing they've found to tell you on that very day, at that very moment. Maybe someone will talk to you about cookery. Maybe someone will talk to you about a Cabinet Minister. And then that particular thing is *yours*, do you see what I mean? Who *knows* whether it's something worth hearing? Who *knows* whether there's someone out there to hear it! It's a leap of faith, do you see? That both parties are making. Really the most enormous leap of faith.

These scenes contrast starkly with the scene after the concert, which displays the glossy veneer that the ruling powers like to present. The radiance of the spotlights and the glitter of diamonds contrast with the lack of light in the gloomy, threatening restaurant. In the light of what has been revealed about the plight of the Indians, Joan's enthusiasm for □our Institute of Indigenous Textiles□ and her contempt for the Indians who staff Aaron's hotel seem patronizing. This tone continues when the hostess's son adopts a contemptuous attitude towards the scruffy Beale and later at the reception, which is held at a house that the army guards against a resentful populace.

The glittering world of the reception has lost its attraction for Aaron, even when he receives the adulation he has craved for so long in the form of people calling out for him. Instead, he seeks out Beale near the Indian servants' quarters. Beale is describing into his tape recorder the understated beauties of the remnants of the Indian culture: a

fragment of pottery; children joining hands in an almost-forgotten game. Beale recalls a happier and more prosperous time for the Indians, when he first arrived here. He had seen a crowd of Indian women walking down a mountain to do their washing. He had longed to speak to them and make the sort of connection that has proved so elusive throughout this story. He retains a hope that he may still make that connection. He says, □I know they're still there□they'll always be there, beyond the curtain of blood.□ He plans to return the following morning:

And finally we'll speak. Please be there with me. They'll be so happy. . . . Because everyone has something, some little thing, my darling, they've been waiting so long to tell you.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on □Someone to Talk To,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Why is the name of Caroline's cat, Lady Chatterley, an ironic choice by Eisenberg? Research the name and write a paragraph explaining the meaning behind it. Can you think of other names for the cat that would be equally ironic, given Aaron's situation?

The country and political problems described strongly resemble Guatemala, but Eisenberg does not specify this country in her story. Research the geography and history of some other countries in the region. Choose another country in which the story could take place, and write a paragraph explaining why you chose that particular location. Find a map of the country and include it with your writing.

Beale criticizes the United States for its treatment of its own native people. Compare the treatment of the native Mayans in this story with the way Native Americans have been treated in the United States. In what ways are the two situations similar and/or different? Make a side-by-side chart comparing the two situations. Include the different rationales given for the persecution of the native people.

While people know that the number of homeless people in the United States rose dramatically during the 1980s, definite statistics concerning the exact number of the homeless are not available. Why do you think it is so hard to count the homeless population? List three reasons. Then find statistics estimating the homeless population in the United States in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and draw a graph showing the changes.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: The early 1980s are some of the bloodiest years of the thirty-six-year civil war in Guatemala. Violent counter-insurgency measures taken by the army rage out of control, resulting in the killing of over 100,000 people, including thousands of indigenous Mayan Indians. The violence is aggravated by the financial and military support of the United States, which helps the oppressive government in an effort to keep communism out of Central America.

Today: The signing of a peace treaty in 1996 ends the civil war. Guatemala is governed by a parliamentary system. The president and parliament are democratically elected every four years, and though corruption still exists in the government, conditions have improved greatly since the 1980s.

1980s: The United States and the Soviet Union are still engaged in the cold war, making the presence of communism in Central America a matter of great concern to the U.S. government.

Today: The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ends the cold war, making communism in Central America a matter of less importance to the U.S. government. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States turns its attention to economic threats posed by volatile governments in the Middle East.

1980s: According to census data, in 1980, 6.4 percent of the U.S. population is Hispanic.

Today: The percentage of Hispanic Americans in the United States nearly doubles between 1980 and 2000; in 2000, the percentage was 12.5. In 2003, the Census Bureau announces that Hispanics now outnumber blacks in the United States. If Hispanics had constituted such a large segment of the population in the early 1980s, the U.S. government may have found it more difficult politically to aid oppressive governments in Central America.

1980s: Of five Central American countries□Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua□only Costa Rica has a stable democratic government. Both Guatemala and El Salvador are in the throes of civil war, and Nicaragua's new Sandinista government is undermined by the United States beginning in 1981. The government of Honduras keeps changing hands in the 1970s through coups and then in the 1980s becomes a base of operations for rebels against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Today: All five Central American countries are democratic republics, with leaders elected by popular vote every four to five years.

What Do I Read Next?

Deborah Eisenberg's first two short story collections, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency* and *Under the 82nd Airborne*, were released together in 1997 in one volume entitled, *The Stories (So Far) of Deborah Eisenberg*. The collection includes other stories set in Latin America.

Eisenberg's Latin America-based stories have been compared to works by Graham Greene and Robert Stone. *The Portable Graham Greene* (1994), which includes two complete novels, excerpts from other novels, short stories, essays, and more, is a good introduction to Greene's work. *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981) is Stone's political thriller about Americans in a fictitious Central American country run by a right-wing military government.

A Brief History of Central America (1989), written by Costa Rican scholar Hector Perez Brignoli, summarizes the history, describes the geography of the region, and analyzes the political and social problems of the five Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica).

Novelist Kathy Reichs tackles the subject of massacres by the Guatemalan military in her mystery novel, *Grave Secrets* (2002). The disappearance of four girls and the murder of a human-rights investigator makes Reichs's heroine, Temperance Brennan, believe that the same atrocities of the 1980s are happening again in 2002.

Further Study

Dubal, David, *Reflections from the Keyboard: The World of the Concert Pianist*, Summit Books, 1984.

This book contains a collection of interviews with famous concert pianists, including Murray Perahia, Andre Watts, and the late Glenn Gould and Vladimir Horowitz. In each interview, Dubal and the pianist discusses performance, technique, and interpretation.

Remnick, David, comp., *Wonderful Town: New York Stories from the New Yorker,* Modern Library, 2001.

This anthology of stories originally published in the *New Yorker* includes Eisenberg's story □What It Was Like, Seeing Chris,□ as well as stories by Philip Roth, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Rossi, Peter H., *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Rossi presents an academic analysis of the homeless and extremely poor, including demographic data, along with an interpretation of what the data means and suggestions for solutions.

Wilkinson, Daniel, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*, Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Through personal interviews with Guatemalan citizens, Wilkinson tells the story of the country's thirty-six-year civil war from many different viewpoints. Included are accounts of atrocities committed by the army against entire communities and disturbing descriptions of the CIA's involvement with the Guatemalan government.

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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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