

The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou Short Guide

The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou by Kristin Hunter

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Overview..... | 3 |
| About the Author..... | 4 |
| Setting..... | 5 |
| Social Sensitivity..... | 6 |
| Literary Qualities..... | 7 |
| Themes and Characters..... | 8 |
| Topics for Discussion..... | 10 |
| Ideas for Reports and Papers..... | 11 |
| For Further Reference..... | 12 |
| Related Titles..... | 13 |
| Copyright Information..... | 14 |

Overview

The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou explores important questions involving sibling rivalry, racial antagonism between black teen-agers and white police officers, problems of self-acceptance, and a young adult's struggle to break free of parental control. The novel's central character, fourteen-year-old Louretta (Lou) Hawkins, confronts an array of conflicts within her family, school, and community, allowing Hunter an opportunity to examine several important themes.

The ideas that Hunter develops through her central and supporting characters are familiar to most adolescents. Many youngsters compete with their siblings for their parents' attention and affection, just as Louretta competes with her sister, Arneatha. Louretta is convinced that her mother gives Arneatha special privileges. Believing that Arneatha is her mother's "pet" causes Louretta to suffer tremendous emotional pain.

The teen-ager's need for some private space at home is another concern with which most adolescents can identify.

Louretta has no privacy because she lives in a small house with ten family members and must share her room with two younger sisters. As she contemplates her severely crowded environment, she realizes that many of her friends live under similar conditions.

She understands why teen-agers gather on street corners and in alleys after school. To alleviate this problem, Louretta decides to establish a clubhouse where she and her friends can meet after school for safe, wholesome fun.

Much of the novel centers on Louretta's fight to gain support for her idea from her peers and from skeptical adults.

Hunter's novel also addresses the need to achieve self-acceptance. Some of Louretta's friends ridicule her reddish brown hair and light complexion, making her feel unattractive, self-conscious, and different. Fortunately, Louretta's mother helps her to understand and appreciate her diverse ethnic heritage. In *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, Louretta embarks on a frequently painful but essential voyage of discovery, learning about courage, commitment, self-confidence, and ethnic pride.

About the Author

Kristin Eggleston Hunter was born on September 12, 1931, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her father was a school principal and U.S. Army colonel, and her mother worked as a pharmacist and teacher. Hunter earned a bachelor's degree in education from the University of Pennsylvania in 1951.

Although she was trained to teach elementary school, she decided instead to pursue a variety of employment opportunities. She has worked as a copywriter for advertising agencies and, at different times, a research assistant, lecturer assistant, and lecturer in English at the University of Pennsylvania. Hunter has also held the post of writer-in-residence at Emory University.

Hunter's writing career began while she was still in junior high school. At the age of fourteen, she wrote a column for young people that appeared in the Philadelphia edition of the Pittsburgh Courier. Hunter's first novel, *God Bless the Child* (1964), illustrates her exceptional ability to capture the essence of black life in the inner city. An adult novel about a young black girl's struggle to escape the poverty and despair of Harlem, *God Bless the Child* introduces Hunter's particular interest in the plight of black females. Hunter's next novel, *The Landlord* (1966), is a light-hearted account of the problems a rich young man faces when he buys an inner-city apartment building. The novel's humorous tone does not detract from the author's serious reflections on the problem of poverty.

While Hunter's first two novels were written for adults, her later fiction is directed toward young adults. Her best-known novel for young readers, *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, received an award from the National Council on Interracial Books for Children in 1968, and also was honored with the Mass Media Brotherhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1969, and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1971. Hunter published a sequel, *Lou in the Limelight*, in 1981, and continues to write fine books for children and young adults.

Setting

The story is set in an area called Southside in an unnamed city in the northern United States during the 1960s. Plagued with gang violence, crime, and police brutality, Hunter's locale is reminiscent of many large, urban neighborhoods where the vast majority of the residents are poor and black.

Arrogant, bigoted white police officers patrol the streets of the fictional Southside, harassing black teen-agers.

Most of the action in the novel takes place in the Southside clubhouse for teen-agers that Louretta helps to establish. Lou and her friends are sensitive to the racism in their community, and they are aware of the civil rights movement that is gaining momentum throughout much of the United States.

While the level of organized social activism in Southside is low, a few militant youngsters involved with the clubhouse print a newspaper containing articles urging adults to join them in protests against police intimidation.

Two other significant features of Southside include the ubiquitous storefront churches and a small group of Black Muslims whose presence in the community signals the emergence of black pride among the residents.



Social Sensitivity

Socially relevant issues in *The Soul Brothers* and *Sister Lou* revolve around racism. Long-standing tensions between abusive white police officers and black residents point up the need for effective communication and mutual respect across racial and civic lines.

Some readers may view Hunter's portrayal of the police officers who patrol the Southside as too harsh and consistently negative. But historical accounts of American race relations in the 1960s support Hunter's depiction.

Hunter does not mean to imply that all black-white relations were antagonistic during this period in U.S. history. In fact, she is careful to indicate the crucial role that Lou's white teachers play in exposing the police officers' abuse of authority. One of Lou's white teachers also volunteers to help develop activities for the teen-agers who come to the clubhouse after school.

Another important social concern that Hunter addresses in the novel is sexism.

Throughout the book Lou encounters young men who feel threatened by her self-confidence and intelligence. Indeed, one of the young men involved with a neighborhood civil-rights group tells Lou: "Women have a place in this movement, but they can't be the leaders." Lou rejects the limitations that her male peers seek to impose upon her, and she takes a leadership role in the general clubhouse activities. Lou also infuriates gang leaders when she denounces their violent tactics and persuades some gang members to try nonviolent means of resolving differences. Lou also wields considerable influence in the singing group known as "The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou." Lou is an excellent role model for young women who may suffer the effects of others' sexist attitudes.

Literary Qualities

In *The Soul Brothers* and *Sister Lou*, Hunter creates a realistic and compelling picture of life in the inner city.

Hunter's carefully selected images and symbols evoke a complex world in which poverty, violence, and despair dominate the landscape. As a means of coping with these persistent features of their environment, many residents join youth gangs or storefront churches. By controlling certain sections of their neighborhood through verbal and physical intimidation, the gangs offer frustrated teen-agers a tempting illusion of power.

Ironically, the gangs' influence does not extend to their most potent adversary, the white power structure. For many older blacks, the church, with its promise of a glorious life after death, also represents a desirable escape from the unpleasant realities of their surroundings. Lou's mother is one of countless such people who immerse themselves in religion as they strive to make sense of their narrow, blighted lives.

Hunter invests familiar objects and settings with symbolic significance. For example, when Lou first discovers an old piano left in a building once occupied by a storefront church, she is elated, for in the soft evening light the upright looks beautiful. But when Lou examines the piano in the daylight, she notices numerous scars and scratches on the old cabinet; some keys are missing, and the rest are discolored and dirty. Furthermore, the keys make sour, twanging sounds. Clearly, the old piano symbolizes the sharp contrasts that often exist between appearance and reality. This important idea is emphasized further in Hunter's portrayal of Blind Eddie Bell, the ragged, unkempt blues musician, who at first glance appears to be a worthless old tramp. A popular performer in his heyday, Blind Eddie apparently lost his audience when musical tastes shifted from blues to rock 'n' roll. Nevertheless, he is still an accomplished pianist who not only teaches Lou to play blues chords, but also serves as an invaluable source of black music history. Blind Eddie symbolizes the differences between appearance and reality, but more important, he represents the discarded elements of black culture that must be reclaimed and preserved.

Another effective use of images and symbols is Hunter's depiction of the hospital staff that Lou observes when she tries to donate blood for her injured friend. She notices that blacks wearing "dingy gray uniforms" work in the drab, dimly lighted basement, whereas white employees dressed in white work upstairs in cheerful, bright spaces. The workers in this hospital scene are meant to suggest the respective positions of blacks and whites in 1960s society at large.



Themes and Characters

Louretta Hawkins and her older brother William are the most fully developed characters in *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*. A courageous fourteen-year-old, Louretta challenges gang leaders to reject violence and to pursue peaceful, productive goals.

Louretta also reminds adults of their responsibility to teen-agers. She persuades parents and teachers to get involved with the clubhouse, and she encourages honest dialogue between teen-agers and adults. On a more personal level, Louretta struggles to overcome the deep resentment that she feels toward her father, who abandoned his family when he could not find work so that his wife could qualify for welfare assistance. Louretta is a sensitive, dynamic character who triumphs over difficult problems during the course of the novel.

William, Lou's twenty-one-year-old brother, acts as a surrogate father for his siblings. Although his job at the post office provides enough income to support the family in his father's absence, William has studied printing in night school and dreams of opening his own printing business. But his goal seems out of reach because his domineering mother—fearful that the printing business would fail and force the family back onto the dreaded welfare rolls—insists that William keep his "safe" job at the post office. But Lou's faith in her brother's ability to build a successful business bolsters his self-confidence, and he decides to open his shop despite his mother's objections. William also plays a central role in Lou's efforts to establish the clubhouse for local teenagers, providing a space in his shop for the club activities; moreover, he displays courage and integrity in dangerous confrontations with hostile police officers and belligerent gang members. Hunter's characterization of William helps young readers understand the necessity of taking risks to reach self-fulfillment.

Eddie Bell, a blind, long-haired old man, plays a key role in the book.

Hunter describes him as wearing "several layers of tattered clothing, carrying a white cane and a battered guitar case." He exerts a profound influence on Lou by teaching her to play the blues with feeling and by putting her in touch with her musical heritage. A once-famous musician, Blind Eddie experiences a new sense of purpose in his role as teacher and culture bearer.

Under his wise instruction, Lou and her friends learn that the essence of "soul" is rooted in blues and gospel traditions.

This knowledge gives them a heightened awareness of their cultural history.

The actions of Officer Lafferty, the central white character in the novel, symbolize the antagonistic patterns that often shaped relations between white police officers and the black citizens that they were ostensibly protecting in the 1960s. Throughout the book, Officer Lafferty and his men harass and intimidate the young people in Lou's neighborhood. Because the teen-agers witness daily examples of police brutality and



wanton abuse of power, they hate and fear the officers who patrol their neighborhood. Officer Lafferty seems to derive a perverse satisfaction from provoking black youngsters into behavior that gives him cause to arrest them. In one incident, Lafferty physically assaults a pregnant teenager who belittles his complaints about excessive noise coming from the clubhouse. Hunter leaves no doubt that Lafferty and his fellow officers are racists who treat blacks with utter contempt.

Hunter also depicts a fascinating group of teen-agers who join Lou in her efforts to organize the clubhouse. Many of the youngsters are gang members who are tired of Lafferty's abusive tactics. Fess, the militant leader of the gang known as the Hawks, is also a poet. He wants to publish a newspaper that would inform and unite the community in an organized protest against conditions in the neighborhood. When a police officer accidentally kills Jethro, a popular youngster who sings tenor in Lou's group, the club's newspaper reports the tragedy, arousing the indignation of many Southside residents. A quiet unassuming teenager named Calvin uses the clubhouse activities to develop his skills as a visual artist. Calvin also shows incredible bravery in the face of threats from police officers. These teen-agers are representative of the young people that Louretta tries to save from the violent, negative influences of their environment.

Louretta's dream of rescuing her friends from the perils of the streets turns into a nightmare when police officers raid the clubhouse during a fundraising dance, mortally wounding one of her schoolmates. This tragedy plunges Lou into despair and prompts her to charge her school and church with hypocrisy. Lou's white teachers had taught her to view police officers as friendly guardians of the public, but Lou's personal experience has created quite a different image. Moreover, Lou feels deceived by a church that continues to proclaim God's justice in the midst of chronic poverty, pervasive crime, and corrupt police officers. Lou's faith in her school is restored when she learns that several teachers, outraged by the senseless killing, persuade the mayor to allow the reopening of William's print shop and the resumption of clubhouse activities without further police harassment. Hunter's emphasis on perseverance, cooperation, and faith in human potential reinforces fundamental values that encourage young readers to develop a strong sense of self.



Topics for Discussion

1. At the beginning of the novel, Lou dreads going home after school. Why does she take the long way home? Is she envious of the boys' freedom to gather on the sidewalks and in the alleys?
2. White police officers "constantly arrested Southside fellows whether they had done anything wrong or not." How does this abuse of authority affect the police officers' image in the Southside community?
3. Most parents encourage their children's efforts to achieve career goals.
Why does Mrs. Hawkins oppose her son's plan to open his own print shop?
4. Blind Eddie Bell introduces Lou and her friends to the blues. Does Blind Eddie suggest a link between black gospel and the blues?
5. Lou sets Fess's poem, "Hungry Cat Blues," to music. What is the poem about?
6. Explain why Lou feels like an "outsider" after the policeman shoots Jethro.
Is she disillusioned?
7. In what ways are sexism and racism similar? Find two examples of sexist attitudes in the novel, and compare them to examples of racism in the book.
8. Why did Lou's father abandon his wife and children? Does the welfare system bear some responsibility for the high incidence of absent fathers in poor black families?
9. Some critics view the novel's ending as contrived and unsatisfactory. What do you think of the ending? Does it ignore the serious social issues' raised in the preceding chapters?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. For the most part, Hunter's black characters speak standard English but they are also fluent in street dialect. Is this dialect difficult to understand? Has it changed since the 1960s? Make a list of examples of street dialect from the novel.

2. Lou and her young friends strive to grasp the essence of "soul" and to express it through their music. Is black English an aspect of "soul"? Explain.

How would you define "soul"?

3. At one point in the novel, Lou attends a meeting of Black Muslims. Consult an encyclopedia or other general reference work for background information on Black Muslims (also known as the Nation of Islam). Who were Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X? What role did these men play in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s? You may also want to consult some periodicals and report on the activities of the Black Muslims today, particularly in urban areas such as Washington, D.C., or Detroit.

4. Blind Eddie Bell identifies blind Lemon Jefferson and W. C. Handy as major figures in the history and development of the blues. Write a brief biographical sketch of these musicians, highlighting their achievements.

5. Realistic characters possess both good and bad personality traits. List some of the positive and negative traits that you see in Lou. Explain how they surface in the book.

For Further Reference

Neufeld, John. "Review." *New York Times Book Review* (January 26, 1969): 26. The review praises Hunter's vivid description of the inner city but finds the book's ending unrealistic and contrived.

Sutherland, Zena. "Review." *Saturday Review* (October 19, 1968): 37. This review identifies Lou's struggle to achieve self-acceptance as a central theme in the novel.

Thompson, Judith, and Gloria Woodard. "Black Perspective in Books for Children." In *The Black American in Books for Children*, edited by Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard.

Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972.

This brief commentary applauds Hunter's depiction of inner city culture from a black point of view.

Related Titles

After receiving numerous letters from young readers who wanted to know what happened to the characters in *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, Hunter wrote a sequel called *Lou in the Limelight*. In the sequel Lou and the singing group have an agent and a recording contract, and they earn large salaries performing in Las Vegas. But their success exposes them to many temptations. For example, the boys develop an expensive gambling habit, and Lou becomes involved with drugs.

Artistically, *Lou in the Limelight* suffers from poor character development and a weak conclusion, but readers will appreciate the novel's exciting plot and the valuable moral lessons it teaches.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996