Tabloid Dreams Short Guide

Tabloid Dreams by Robert Olen Butler

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Contents

Characters

Butler's characters in this collection are drawn from a wide range of social and geographical origins. Each is, in some way, alienated or isolated from significant others in life.

The nameless English gentleman on the Titanic has long been a civil servant in India. He is well-schooled in the theological world view of the Anglican tradition and has learned something of the religious cultures of India as well. He is strongly shaped by the British uppermiddle-class notions of good manners, and although he may not agree with his happenstance companion's views on women's liberation, he is too much the gentleman to be unpleasant about her opinions. The woman he longs to embrace is an American suffragette who is strongly committed to a woman's right to chose her own way in life—and eventually in death as well. She recognizes, once "rescued" into a Washington D.C. hotel via the Bermuda Triangle almost a century after the Titanic sinking, that the gentleman she deeply desires is somehow "near" in the water, and she submerges herself, in the end, in cold water in the bathtub confident they will ultimately merge with each other.

Loretta, in "Woman Uses Glass Eye to Spy on Philandering Husband," is a middle-class midwestern working woman with a husband but no children. A court stenographer, she has recorded years of testimony of men and women in divorce court, and she finds herself in distress as she sees herself in the same situations that had always happened to other people. Discovering that her glass eye, when out of the socket, still allowed her to see and even hear events from its own perspective, Loretta gives the reader a "double vision" account of what she thought, saw, and heard in her own body as well as the events observed by the glass eye when it was out of her eye socket. In shock and in pain, Loretta is virtually beside herself as she sees sign after sign of betrayal and loss. Yet in the grip of emotional trauma, she is powerless to say or do anything to change the shift of her husband's affections to the other woman.

A pilot and a builder of home kit aircraft, Roy originally courted Loretta with flights in his Cessna, giving her, as the saying goes, "a bird's eye view" of the territory around Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

While he spends much time in the garage constructing planes to sell, he occasionally takes Loretta out to show her his progress in assembling the airframe, or in putting "the skin" on the wings or fuselage. As his passion for Loretta fades, however, he tries not to show her his interest in someone else. He brings her flowers one day after fourteen years without doing so and erupts in anger when she asks him why. He occasionally has laundered the bed sheets by the time she gets home from her work in court.

Roy does not know that Loretta's eye has begun to allow her "remote viewing" of his activities and that Loretta sees all when Roy's lover takes the artificial eye from the water glass to use as a "jewel" in her navel.

The lead characters in the Tabloid Dreams stories are usually isolated or alienated from others in some way. The man and woman in the two Titanic tales were both much absorbed in their work or political interests and neither had experienced a substantial emotional connection with another person. The court stenographer, though losing her husband, also loses her job because, when she sees him by way of the glass eye in his tryst with the other woman in their bedroom, she is so disrupted that she has to leave her work assignment. Gertrude, although sharing decades of experience with her friend Eva, including years of mothering, cooking for family, and especially baking cookies, realizes that she does not think and feel what Eva assumes she does. Gertrude, rather, wishes to bake things really for herself after her husband dies. She has a will to personal freedom that her socialization for the roles of mother and wife does not permit.

The "Jealous Husband . . ." persona lodged in the body of a yellow-nape Amazon parrot had been convinced of his wife's affairs with other men during his life as a human, and as a bird purchased from a pet shop and caged with a partial view of the bedroom at home, he can see her merry widow episodes with other men. Still bitterly jealous of her attentions, he is happy to be able to call one red-neck type "cracker" to his face, but his parrot vocabulary is never adequate to express his continuing love and jealousy. He treasures the times his wife takes him from the cage to pet, yet he cannot have any longer the full involvement of a man with a woman that she allows to other men. His perceptions are mixed—sometimes blending the human recollections with avian behaviors. For example, when angry that his wife is with a lover in the bedroom, the bird will take out his frustrations on one of the toys in the cage. Wishing for peace in the trees and sky outside the house, the bird remains only vaguely aware of the nature and function of glass, and flies against the limit to his freedom in frustration. As a human, the persona died in a fall from a tree as he attempted to see into another man's bedroom. As a bird, the persona has even less ability to hold his wife's affections and can only deal with the frustration and rage of jealousy by battering against the glass that allows views of, but blocks access to, his escape.

The small boy turned hit man in the lower-class neighborhoods of New York resents his status as particularly undersized. It is bad enough to be a little kid in a poor and rough neighborhood with a mother who limps from one man to another in her attempt to piece together some support for herself and her son.

The boy struggles emotionally in taking on aspects of "a man's role" with a mother who still remembers vividly his baby days, and now sees him at best as a schoolboy. The boy struggles for a sense of self and tries to imagine some kind of relationship with his birth father who has long since abandoned roles of father and husband, no longer providing either emotionally, sexually, or financially for the boy's mother. Using guns, the boy hopes to provide substantial funds for his mother.

Identifying his own "growth" and reaching for some degree of identification with his long-absent father, the boy switches from killing for the Russian immigrant gangster with the lighter Makarov pistol Ivan provided to his father's heavier Colt .45. He radically raises his price for a hit because he wants enough money for his mother to get a fashionable wardrobe.

The preacher's daughter who narrates "Every Man She Kisses Dies" never gives her own name, although she does give names for some of the men she has loved. Living in Chicago, She is estranged from her father, whom she sees as godlike, because he holds to the view that sex outside of marriage is wrong, while she wishes she could ask God "What's wrong with seeking solace with love?" Of relationship with her father, she reports that "he wouldn't even talk with me when he was dying."

Contrasting herself to the loose women condemned in the Old Testament book of Proverbs, she draws a distinction: "They were prostitutes and all I did was love the men I wanted to love."

Once it is apparent she has a "kiss of death," however, she does once respond to a boorish construction worker with the kiss he asks for with retribution in mind. He has asked, she perceives, not for love but "to control and demean and cast away" and she is not surprised to hear, when she walks away, "a long roar of falling concrete and beams."

Only after several desirable men have died following a kiss from her does she dare to tell another, named Philip, about her curse. He believes her stories and admits to fear, but still asks to be kissed.

Philip makes a distinction between himself and the others: He knows the risk of this love. He knows the risk and is still willing to proceed, even though his love may mean sacrifice of his life.

With Edna Bradshaw, Butler offers a small-town middle-aged divorcee from Bovary, Alabama who has been to the city of Mobile "a couple of times" but "didn't take to it." She is content to live on the outskirts of a small southern town, share her residential trailer with Eddie her cat, and earn a modest living as a beautician. Edna evaluates things in her life against what her father would say, although she does not necessarily agree with all her father's judgments. Her father lives near by, and while she is grateful that he provided her the trailer after her husband left her for a career in cable television hook-ups, she does not feel obligated to spend much time with him: Still, she lives shaped by the force of his opinions even when she has opportunities to think and act on her own. She calls the spaceman she meets in the Wal-Mart parking lot one night "Desi," because the name he cites is too hard for her to recognize or pronounce. She is flattered by his attentions, and consents to going out with him—even for a tour of distant worlds— as long as he is assigned to earth research. When he asks her to go away with him, though, to his next assignment, Edna cannot leave the familiar small town environment she has lived in all her life. The love of the alien was fulfilling, and when he is gone she longs for another relationship, but she refuses to give up the familiar earthly life for love in the otherworldly unknown.

Social Concerns

The tide of the collection, Tabloid Dreams reflects the modish and sensationalistic premises of the individual story tides: they read like the headlines of the yellow journalism tabloids commonly available at supermarket check stands.

The often forlorn and isolated characters in the stories display in various ways the human need for a fulfilling relationship.

The need may be that of a son longing for an absent father and struggling with the role of "the man of the house" as shown in "Nine-Year- Old Boy Is World's Youngest Hit Man," or it may be the need of the boyfriend or girlfriend in a courting relationship, as in "Every Man She Kisses Dies," "Doomsday Meteor Is Coming," and "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover," or it may be an overtly sexual expression of need as in "Woman Uses Glass Eye to Spy on Philandering Husband," "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot," and "Woman Struck by Car Turns into Nymphomaniac."

Many of the tales involve a surrealistic factor, reflecting the late twentieth-century popular taste for something beyond the realistic, factual explanations of life situations. The initial story "Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed" uses a watery spiritualist variation on the premise that the atoms which composed a person of one era later exist in the body of another person centuries later. The narrator of the story recalls his encounter with a woman on the Titanic as it was sinking, then recalls perceptions, not of judgment and an afterlife in hell, heaven, or somewhere in between, but perceptions of other water-related situations prior to having his consciousness alight in the plastic channels of a waterbed, beneath a couple still embodied in their flesh. The final story, "Titanic Survivors Found in Bermuda Triangle," like a bookend, features a woman who remembers being attracted to the gentleman who saw her to a lifeboat as the Titanic was sinking. In both stories, much realistic detail of the last hours of the Titanic is blended with the supernatural or surreal depiction of the human spirit or consciousness transcending the disaster by the man's inexplicable floating through time and water, and the woman's apparent time-warp rescue from the Bermuda Triangle. Neither narrator understands the dynamics of enduring past the end of a physical life, and neither perceives a purpose for enduring other than the yearning for contact with the other.

As many in the English-speaking societies in the twentieth century have grown skeptical about traditional doctrines of afterlife, they have, in some instances, chosen to redefine their views, often loosely. Butler's tales involving the Titanic imagery reflect the 1990s impulse to connect with something spiritual, but in terms different from those of the long-established major religions of the world.

The settings of "Boy Born With Tattoo of Elvis" and "Nine-Year-Old Boy Is World's Youngest Hit Man," both bring attention to the social problems of single mothers and their sons dealing with poverty, and the latter story in particular reflects the end-of-the-century increase in violent crime among the young.

Techniques

Butler has used story tides that are common to articles in the weekly tabloid newspapers available in supermarkets, and the stories contain elements from various sensationalized urban legends of the late twentieth century. Along with fictionalized accounts of movie stars' infidelities or health or contract woes, the tabloids have for years proffered tales of John F. Kennedy being alive but incog nito somewhere, of aliens abducting ordinary people from their homes or cars, of biblical prophecies of doomsday, of astronomers' prophecies of meteors some day to hit the earth, of sightings of Elvis Presley, of boats and aircraft and their crews being lost in the Atlantic region called the Bermuda Triangle, and so on.

Among the stories, Butler weaves occasional cross-references that connect stories which might at first reading seem quite unrelated, threading just enough familiarity through disparate works to make the book title accurate. In addition to the clearly mirrored effects of the Titanic stories, Butler's Edna Bradshaw thinks of making cookies for her spaceman, in terms that echo Gertrude's cooking contest situation in "Woman Loses Cookie Bake-Off. ..": "... just last week I got a prize-winning recipe, off a can of cooking spray, that looks like it'd put flesh on a fencepost." The Generation X-type narrator in the Westwood section of Los Angeles, Linus, who is so impressed by the threat of worldwide destruction by meteor, has learned of the threat from the editor of Real World Weekly—a sensationalist rag or tabloid—who is interviewed on a television show entitled Inside Scoop. The New York book editor who denies being a nymphomaniac has been so labeled by that very editor of Real World Weekly, and she uses a piece of meteorite on his desk as a murder weapon. The image of the rock from outer space crashing down from above serves as resolution for one story, title concept for another.

Within individual stories, too, Butler at times makes particularly adept use of images pertinent to the subject matter in play. The sexually active New York book editor, for example, describes her voice while seducing the tabloid editor as "slick as K-Y jelly," a lubricant with assorted hospital uses, but applied by the average nonmedical user as a genital lubricant.

Also, as Linus, in "Doomsday Meteor Is Coming," reflects on his childhood response to his grandmother's death and the possible process of dead people going to heaven, he envisions the transportation in strictly material terms, the products of his father's employer—Boeing 747 aircraft ascending into the skies. But he opines, "If you've earned heaven, you should do better than airline food on the way."

Only some of the main characters in the Tabloid Dreams are given names, and when the reader lives through the experiences of a persona without a name, the sense of alienation is strengthened. Such is the case with the disembodied Englishman and the American woman of the Titanic stories, the persona who remembers his life as husband of the free-spirited widow who now owns him in parrot form, the nine-year-old shooting his way to manhood, the wayward preacher's daughter with the fatal kiss, the New York

book editor who resists being termed nymphomaniac, and the teenager birthmarked with the face of Elvis.

As in much of Butler's other work, the first-person narrators in Tabloid Dreams mix the events of their present activities with reverie, memories of people, and events from the past. Dialogue appears occasionally, and in "Every Man She Kisses Dies," the entire closing scene is managed by dialogue, leaving the reader to infer the implications of the kiss for Philip. In contrast, the American woman submerging herself in the cold bath water in the closing Titanic story declares her intent to join the man she wants.

Religious imagery and references are put to use for contrast in the opening story, "Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed." The Englishman is aware he has not passed from life as he knew it on to a heaven or hell as portrayed in Christian tradition, nor is he in a middle state of limbo, apart from earthly life. Rather, the notion of the spirit or consciousness of a person persisting for decades in the water cycle of ocean currents, evaporation into clouds, and precipitation into streams that return to ocean currents gives subtle opportunity for the reader familiar with Judaeo-Christian traditions to speculate on many implications of symbolism. The symbolism, however, shows Butler tweaking possibilities, for, in the Genesis Creation Stories, it is the Spirit of God that broods over the face of the deep and brings forth living things.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is termed "Living Water," and church traditions offer varying perceptions of baptism as a sign of washing away mortal sin.

Butler's Englishman's sensibility can barely identify itself specifically as spirit, or separate from the natural world, and is certainly not posed as God or Messiah, or even a particularly devout soul in a definable afterlife. Rather, through its hints of the various traditional Christian images and its occasional references to Indian Hindu culture, it opens familiar religious connotations of water and afterlife to examination in the light of the persisting desire of one human for the embrace of another.

The clearest use of biblical material in the collection is also the most extensive.

"Every Man She Kisses Dies," uses indirect quotations from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs to establish the narrator's memories of her father and his rationale for rejecting her sexual activity outside of marriage. In subtler biblical allusions, when he dies, the narrator's father "turn[s] his face to the wall. Also, the man who still wishes to love the narrator in the end is named Philip.

Themes

The dozen short stories in Tabloid Dreams all involve human needs for and in relationships. The Titanic tales that bracket the other ten develop two characters who have been isolated from another's passion and touch, the man for fear of intimacy, and the woman by her passion for the cause of equal rights for her gender in a patriarchal society.

Loretta of the glass eye can see herself and her husband moving step by step through the classic stages of a dying marriage—his passion is lost to her and focused on another woman. Loretta can see the pattern, but cannot stop it.

The sixteen-year-old boy bearing the Elvis birthmark resents his mother's pattern of taking up with one man after another, and only begins to understand the power and depth of passion for intimacy after his first encounter with a girl.

The elderly woman who immolates herself at the baking contest has realized that, regardless of her wishes to do things for herself after forty years of marriage, she is still baking for her late husband— she is not free to pursue her passion for baking for herself.

The parrot in "Jealous Husband Returns . . ." still has awareness enough of his recent life as a man to know he still loves and desires his wife, but all the passion he yearns to express to her is limited to phrases such as "pretty bird" and "bad bird."

The book editor who moves from her one boyfriend to a succession of sexual encounters in "Woman Struck by Car . . ." justifies her passion, not as nymphomania, but as seeing each new man intensely as an individual. She wishes to pursue her sexual passion without being labeled or controlled by what others think.

From the perspective of Freudian psychology, a gun is seen as a phallic symbol, and the undersized boy in "NineYear-Old ..." uses guns to "be a man" in ways no one expects him to be.

The wayward preacher's daughter in "Every Man She Kisses Dies" draws directly on citations from the Book of Proverbs to explain her struggle with her perceptions of God as the Old Testament Father who condemns sexual relationships outside of marriage as wrong.

She cannot understand why her passion for love should be wrong or deadly to others. She struggles with her personal responsibility in having the power to kill with a kiss. In this tale, too, Butler makes overt connection with the problem of AIDS as the character agonizes over what the nature of God must be if such terrible suffering can be linked to a person's deepest passions. The last relationship in the story weaves in Christological allusions to sacrificial love and, by implication, the operations of Old Testament Law and judgment are answered with New Testament theology of Grace.

Linus, the somewhat shy narrator of "Doomsday Meteor Is Coming" takes a television gossip show story about the threat from space more seriously than his friends. The notion of impending death, of no future, makes him more sensitive to his girlfriend's wishes. Caught up in the vogue of body piercing, Janis already has ear, nose and lip rings, while Linus has none. As a "sign of something very important," Linus agrees to Janis's impulse that the two of them get their left nipples pierced. Thus Linus accepts a bodily intrusion he had previously avoided.

Edna Bradshaw, in "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover," yearns for intimacy with someone, but she is so accustomed to her home territory that she cannot accept a long-term relationship with someone who will take her away from home and her connection with her own father who lives near by. Although she does not visit with her father very much, she often measures her life experiences and her own ideas against her memory of her father's proverbs and attitudes.

The aging ex-president in "JFK Attends Jackie Auction" has lived for decades with "national security" limits because his head wound during the assassination attempt has rendered him incapable of discretion in what he says. Had he lived with Jackie, he would have told of all his affairs with other women. Had he continued in the Presidency, he would have revealed any secrets he knew to the persons nearest to him at the moment he thought of them. He still loves Jackie and wants some souvenir of their relationship, but he has too little money to buy anything that is left on the last day of bidding. And even though his federal keepers provide him women, when they come to him, he is so drugged—for security reasons—that he cannot remember later how or whether he actually enjoyed physical or emotional passion with the visitors. His unbridled freedom of speech has become a kind of prison.

Key Questions

Many people scorn the wildly sensational headlines of the tabloid weeklies that many supermarkets place close to their checkout stands, and yet as they wait to purchase their groceries, many become curious enough about the oddities and tragedies emblazoned across the newsprint to actually buy the papers.

Celebrities frequently sue tabloids for misrepresentations or falsehoods that have been printed, and many ordinary folk at times try to make some money by offering to sell tragic personal stories or pictures of odd people or outlandish phenomena.

At first glance, by gathering a dozen stories with sensationalistic titles into a volume entitled Tabloid Dreams, Butler may seem to be doing no more than "cashing in" on popular low-brow appetites for sex and violence. However, his persistent sensitivity for the needs of the human heart and soul shows through-in each of the stories. The apparent rambling of a character's thoughts from a present event off to a memory and back to the present event gives the reader full display of what that character struggles with at heart. Sometimes the character recognizes what he or she desires and what must be done to achieve it, and sometimes the character cannot think or act effectively to fulfill the need.

1. How well do the first and last stories—the Titanic stories—work together? How many factors such as references to water and details of the ship sinking connect the two? Do they create a special effect by bracketing the other ten stories, or should they have been placed together? If used together in the collection, would they work better as the first two or the last two stories in the collection, or should they be in the middle?

2. How many images or references in some way connect one story with another? Do the shared references such as the meteor motif which shows as resolution material in one story and title theme premise in another story hold the set of stories together well, or do they seem artificial attempts to connect unrelated tales? Should one set of characters be used through all the plot lines to make the collection unified?

3. How many narrators in the collection are male and how many are female?

How varied are they in age and social status? How believable are women such as Edna Bradshaw or Gertrude Schmidt.

4. In "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis," how did the mother first respond to the birthmark? How did other people respond to it? Why do the mother and son usually keep the birthmark a secret from others? How does the boy feel about his mother's string of male friends? When the boy meets Tina in the abandoned warehouse, the language becomes ambiguous: "and then I know . . . ." Does anything physical happen between the two, or does the boy recognize intensities in feeling without physical action? "Why does the reader find numerous references to Elvis Presley in the story but never a name for the boy?

5. In "Woman Loses Cookie Bake-Off, Sets Self on Fire," in how many ways do Gertrude and Eva share traits such as motherhood, widowhood, and so forth?

What motivation does Eva have for believing she understands Gertrude's thoughts and feelings? How does Gertrude feel after her husband dies? Why do the two women enter the baking contest?

A casual observer in the story might conclude Gertrude set herself alight because she was upset about losing the contest. What evidence does the reader have for a different opinion of Gertrude's motive?

6. Robert Olen Butler discloses in interviews that he has had a pet parrot for years. How well does he depict behaviors of a caged bird in "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot"? What vocabulary does the parrot have? How aptly does the parrot use the vocabulary?

What does the narrating persona really want to tell his widow? How well did he communicate with her when he was still in human form? In English language tradition we have commonly termed jealousy "the green-eyed monster." Does the parrot have green eyes? What does the story say about jealousy in human relationships?

7. The narrator of "Woman Struck by Car Turns into Nymphomaniac" states that she does not hate men, she wants to touch them. Why does she talk about male celebrities reputed to have (or to have had) many affairs with women?

How does the story of her increased sexual activity get to the tabloid editor?

Where does she encounter information about the ancient Chinese custom of binding the feet of women? What does footbinding represent to her? How does she use the idea when she visits the tabloid editor? How well does she understand her own thoughts and feelings? Is this narrator a good representative of women's rights in modern American society?

8. How does the narrator of "NineYear- Old Boy Is World's Youngest Hit Man" get involved with guns? Where does the boy live, and why isn't he spending most of his time in elementary school? What sort of home life does the boy's mother provide? What does the boy think of the father who deserted him? How does Ivan, the Russian immigrant gangster, relate to the boy? How many hits does the boy get paid for? Why does he turn on Ivan in the end? Could this boy, given some "help" grow up to be a good husband and father?

9. The narrator in "Every Man She Kisses Dies" is a preacher's daughter whose passion, in her father's view, carries her astray. How does she see her relationships with men? How does she perceive the Old Testament warnings against "loose women"? What part of the story relates to the twentieth-century problem of AIDS? How does the narrator link that issue to her own "kiss of death" curse? In this story, Butler uses some Biblical material very directly and some by allusion and implication. Does the story leave the reader with a visible progression from judgmental living to sacrificial love, or does

the emphasis on "law" overbear any implications of "grace"? Is Butler's use of religious ideas and imagery effective, or should the story be told without scripture references and allusions? Can the story make any sense to a reader who has no knowledge of the religious images and doctrines involved?

10. The narrator in "Doomsday Meteor is Coming" takes a television show "warning story" seriously while his friends barely seem to notice. What holds their attention while he is growing increasingly concerned about the predicted catastrophe? The story is set in the Westwood area of Los Angeles, California.

What aspects of the characters speech and styles of dress mark them as young people under the influence of Hollywood? To an observer in the story, what are salient features of Janis, Linus's girlfriend? What does she want Linus to do?

Why does he eventually announce he will do it? How well can they express what their planned action betokens?

11. In what ways might Edna Bradshaw in "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover" be defined as an isolated or alienated character? Why does she tell her spaceman about her grandfather? Why does she choose to call the spaceman "Desi"?

Does she enjoy her dates and travels with him? What does Desi look like, and how does he dress? Why do her coworkers at the beauty shop accept her reason for her two-week absence? How well does Edna relate to her father? Why doesn't she fly off with Desi in the end?

12. Government conspiracy theories arise around many important events in modern life. How many bits and pieces of conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy does Butler employ in "JFK Secretly Attends Jackie Auction"? Why does the narrator say he was represented as dead and replaced as president even though he was alive? Who seems to be providing for his care all these years? How well does the narrator, as an elderly man, think and walk? Is the old man still the womanizer he was rumored to be when young? Since the Kennedy clan has millions, why cannot the old JFK afford to buy a single souvenir at the auction?

Literary Precedents

In the New Testament book The Acts of the Apostles, the Apostle Philip explains to a traveling Ethiopian court official a passage from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, a passage of sacrificial suffering. The Apostle Philip interprets the Old Testament material as a prophecy of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who suffered death to pay for the sins of others.

The Ethiopian official, in the New Testament account, believes and asks to be baptized immediately at the roadside.

Butler's Philip explains to the woman who sees both her father and her God in terms of Old Testament Law and rejection for her sexual activity, that her father is not God, and she should not construe her God as being as loveless as her father had been. In allusive parallel, not to the evangelist and explicator Philip, but to the Jesus of Nazareth depicted in the New Testament as eventually suffering death by crucifixion, Philip's last words before the kiss are "I am a carpenter." He is willing to die for love of her, embody ing the doctrine of Grace.

Related Titles

While none of the stories in Tabloid Dreams connect specifically with Viet Nam war themes of veterans or refugees, a number of factors in the stories do show parallels to or variations on characterizations or plot figures in Butler's warrelated works. "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot" uses the idea of a human consciousness carried within a parrot. His "Mr. Green" in A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (1992; see separate entry) uses the same premise. However, in "Jealous Husband . . .," the narrating persona is within the parrot; in "Mr. Green," the narrator is the woman who owns the parrot and recognizes her Grandfather's spirit in its actions. The frustrated boys in "Nine-Year-Old Boy is World's Youngest Hit Man" and "Boy Born With Tattoo of Elvis" bear similarities to the rebellious teenager, Tony, in The Deuce.

"Every Man She Kisses Dies," "Woman Struck by Car Turns into Nymphomaniac," and "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis" all include women with active sex lives and contending to some degree with others' attitudes toward their sexual relationships. Similar situations are at play in Butler's novels, The Alleys of Eden (1981; see separate entry), Sun Dogs, On Distant Ground (1985; see separate entry), The Deuce (1989; see separate entry), and They Whisper (1994; see separate entry),as well as in several of the stories in A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain.

Beyond his own milieu, Butler's water-borne Englishman's spirit seems akin to the persona in a number of Emily Dickinson's poems such as "Because I could not stop for death," in which consciousness carries into an afterlife that shows recognition of a spirit persisting in some form of a material world, but one not conforming directly to traditional depictions of heaven or hell or judgment.

Gertrude Schmidt's misunderstood impulse for freedom after her husband's death echoes the core idea of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour."

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