

Terms of Endearment Short Guide

Terms of Endearment by Larry McMurtry

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Contents

Terms of Endearment Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	10

Characters

Aurora Greenway, mother of Emma, dominates the novel. She is a profoundly eccentric woman, who charms men but is essentially uninterested in them. Her emotions are reserved for her daughter, whom she manipulates, torments, protects and loves fiercely.

The other major character, Emma, is less strong and not in the least a comic creation. She chooses a traditional marriage to a man who fails her. Although she loves her own children, her mother remains the most important person in her life.

Social Concerns/Themes

Terms of Endearment is the sequel to Moving On (1970) and All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers (1972).

The fourth in McMurtry's "urban tetralogy" is Evening Star (1992). The first two novels are examinations of the various ways in which men and women fail each other. McMurtry's original intent was to have continued that examination, but this novel focuses on a parent-child relationship: the bond between a mother and daughter, with its failures, betrayals and its absolute loyalty.



Techniques

The novel is divided into two unequal sections. The first and longest part is Aurora's story. It is a comic tour de force. Aurora is drawn against a moneyed Houston setting; her only friend is her maid; her days are filled with adventures that at times approach slapstick. McMurtry's skill at creating believable women characters is displayed to its advantage; while comic, Aurora is always believably human, never grotesque. The second part of the novel, Emma's story, is dramatically different from the first section; McMurtry returns to realist narrative, serious and without irony, as he tells of Emma's short, unhappy life. The two parts of the novel are vastly different: one, discursive, comic, satiric; the other, short, sad, elegiac. Although this has bothered some critics, it is clear that McMurtry has succeeded in creating two strong women characters and has defined, with skill and tenderness, the mysterious blood tie between mother and daughter.

Adaptations

Terms of Endearment was made into an enormously successful motion picture in 1983. It won five academy awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress (Shirley MacLaine as Aurora), and Best Supporting Actor (Jack Nicholson as Aurora's lover, Garrett Breedlove). Debra Winger, who played Emma, was nominated for Best Actress.

Although the film is substantially different from the novel, it is true to McMurtry's intent to define the relationship between a mother and daughter.

Literary Precedents

Terms of Endearment is in the tradition of the modern regional novel. It defines the twentieth-century Texas urban setting in a way that recalls Dreiser's Chicago setting of *Sister Carrie* (1900); Edna Ferber's *Giant* (1950) is also a precursor that is specifically Texan.

Another literary precedent can be identified as those novels whose action revolves around the relationship between a parent and child. McMurtry examines the traditional elements of conflict between mother and daughter as well as the strong love and loyalty that transcends all other bonds that people form.

Finally, the novel's great delight in its characters' eccentricity derives from both British and American traditions.

Aurora Greenway's roots are simultaneously in the "humours" character of British literature and in the western, larger-than-life tradition of American literature.



Related Titles

The earlier two novels share theme and characters with *Terms of Endearment*. *Moving On* is the story of Patsy Carpenter, Emma's best friend. In this novel, Emma and her husband Flap are seen in a relatively happy time. As Patsy's marriage fails, Emma's is seen as flawed but stable. Emma is depicted as unfailingly kind, a devoted mother and friend. Emma appears briefly in *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* as the friend and one-time lover of the hero, Danny Deck. This novel also concerns a failed marriage; Emma, again, is seen as a good friend. In *Terms of Endearment*, Patsy appears briefly, and Emma, dying, escapes pain and the demands of the living into dreams of Danny Deck.

The novel returns to both characters and themes of McMurtry's earlier works. The most marked change is the pervasiveness of a sense of the inexorability of time. Although this, too, has always been present in McMurtry's fiction, it assumes a new centrality in this novel. *Some Can Whistle* (1989) also provides a sense of closure to many of the unresolved questions of the earlier novels; it removes the mystery about Danny's fate and allows him to grow old and approach death in a realistic way rather than in the romantic and mysterious darkness of the swirling waters of the Rio Grande. This revisionist ending is more fitting and more disturbing than its rehearsal.

The novel's central character and narrator is Danny Deck, the hero of an earlier novel, *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*. That novel ended with Danny, his marriage over and his parental rights denied, destroying his novel and walking into the Rio Grande.

In *Moving On* and *Terms of Endearment*, Danny's friends assume that he is dead.

Some Can Whistle depends upon McMurtry's little joke: Rather than being literally dead in the waters of a river, Danny, a successful Hollywood writer, is figuratively dead as he uses his Hollywood wealth to isolate himself from friends, love and living. Into this living death bursts T. R., the grown-up child that Danny has never seen.

Danny is a wonderful McMurtry character — eccentric, bewildered by almost everything, living alone with a housekeeper and keeping in contact with the outside world by telephone.

But McMurtry's great triumph is T. R., who locates and invades Danny's protected half-life, demanding that he love her, save her and her two children, help her break her boyfriend out of jail, give her plenty of money to spend on junk, protect her, and now, when it is too late, be her father. Poor Danny, bewildered but full of good will, tries to oblige, and the collision between the aging, reclusive, sophisticated father and the disaster-prone, redneck young daughter provides the novel with its plot and its central theme. That the two learn to love each other is amazing; that they lose each other violently is heartbreaking. Surrounding the central characters of Danny and T. R. are a



host of marvelous McMurtry creations: T. R.'s lover, Muddy, a failed burglar; her children, Bo and Jesse; and the man who kills her, Earl Dee.

Set in the present, *Some Can Whistle* deals with a number of themes, the most important of which is the relationship between parent and child.

This is a familiar theme in McMurtry's work, and he is both eloquent and convincing in his analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between an absentee father and his neglected and abused daughter, grown to adulthood surrounded by violence, fanaticism, and unnecessary sorrow. McMurtry examines this issue with delicacy and restraint. The novel also deals with the issue of aging — the tendency to withdraw from active participation in the business of living; the pain of learning to live a life that encompasses violence, murder, loss, and great love.

Some Can Whistle is a traditional realistic novel. It is a richly detailed account of modern life; set in Texas, it is less grounded in regional concerns than McMurtry's earlier works. It is also traditional in its use of the first person narrator. Danny Deck's voice is richly individual — elegiac, regretful, gentle, and detached, even in loss and sorrow. One is made aware of his loss of power through aging, his regret at that loss of power, and his mild gladness that the storms of youth are forever behind him. The first person narrative allows McMurtry to approximate the process of letting go that is a part of growing old. It is delicately and poignantly achieved.



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