

The Toxic Donut Study Guide

The Toxic Donut by Terry Bisson

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Introduction

"The Toxic Donut," by Terry Bisson, was first published in the June 1993 issue of *Science Fiction Age* magazine. It was included later that year in the short story collection *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*. The story, which takes place in the future, consists of one long monologue, in which a television production assistant walks a guest through the rehearsal for an awards show later that night. However, unlike the recipients at other awards shows, who receive a gift of some sort, the special guest on this show must sacrifice her life by consuming all of humanity's toxic waste from the previous year—which has been condensed into a single, edible donut. Like many of his other works, "The Toxic Donut" combines both humor and social commentary. In this case, Bisson uses his strange depiction of a fictional future to comment on the environmental destruction of earth. The story was very timely, as it was written during the escalation of the environmental movement in the early 1990s, when many organizations and news media raised public awareness of the environment. A copy of the short story can be found in *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*, which was published by Tor Books in a paperback reprint edition in 1995.

Author Biography

Terry Bisson was born on February 12, 1942, in Hopkins County, Kentucky. After graduating from the University of Louisville with his bachelor's degree in 1964, Bisson worked for nine years as a magazine comic writer. Following this, he worked as an auto mechanic (1972-1977) and as an editor and copywriter with Berkley Books (1976-1985). In 1980, Bisson published his first novel, *Wyrdmaker*. Over the next decade, Bisson wrote three more novels: *Talking Man* (1986), *Fire on the Mountain* (1988), and *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990). Although these initial novels earned Bisson some good reviews, it was not until Bisson started publishing his quirky short stories in science fiction magazines that he began to win awards and earn widespread critical acclaim. His short story "Bears Discover Fire" (1991) won both a Hugo and a Nebula award, science fiction's two highest honors, as well as a number of other awards. In 1993, Bisson collected this story and several other magazine stories, including "The Toxic Donut," in *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*.

Bisson is a versatile writer who has pursued science fiction across a number of media. He has adapted several of his stories into stage or audio dramas, and he has adapted several science fiction films by others into novelizations, including *Johnny Mnemonic: A Novel* (1995), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), and *Galaxy Quest* (1999). However, one of Bisson's biggest science fiction writing challenges came in the mid-1990s when he was contracted by Walter M. Miller, Jr. to complete the long-awaited sequel to the author's classic 1960 science fiction novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Miller had become ill and could not finish the novel. Working from Miller's notes and outline, Bisson wrote the final sixty pages of the work. The sequel, entitled *St. Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman*, was published posthumously in 1997, with no cover credit to Bisson's involvement.

In addition to his adult science fiction works, Bisson has also written or cowritten several young adult novels and nonfiction books. These include a biography, *Nat Turner* (1987); a nonfiction book, *Car Talk with Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers* (1991), with National Public Radio's call-in mechanics, Tom and Ray Magliozzi; the science fiction novel *Boba Fett: The Fight to Survive* (2002); and two science fiction novels with Stephanie Spinner—*Be First in the Universe* (2000) and *Expiration Date: Never* (2001). Finally, Bisson has adapted several works into comics or graphic novels. These have included selections by science fiction and fantasy authors such as Greg Bear and Anne McCaffrey and classics by William Shakespeare and Jane Austen.

Bisson's science fiction books include his second collection of short stories, *In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories* (2000), and his sixth novel, *The Pickup Artist* (2001). Bisson lives and works in New York City.



Plot Summary

At the beginning of the futuristic story "The Toxic Donut," two characters, Ron and Kim, are on an awards show stage, where Ron, the administrative assistant for the annual show, is conducting a rehearsal. As Ron explains to Kim, the guest, how the live show will work, he establishes the pattern that the rest of the story follows. The story consists entirely of Ron's instructions to Kim. Ron gives a little information about the show, and then Kim responds with a question or statement, although the reader never hears what Kim says. As a result, the reader must derive what Kim is saying from Ron's responses to her questions and statements.

Ron starts by introducing himself and then congratulates Kim, who finds this odd. Ron explains that Kim has been chosen to represent all of humanity and nature for one half-hour that night and then asks questions about her family, whom Ron is sure will be watching the show—since it has higher ratings than the Academy Awards. Ron takes Kim over to another area of the stage and starts to walk her through the half-hour program. In the first ten minutes, Ron tells Kim that she will wait off to the side and that she is the first woman in two years to be on the show. Kim asks that, if this is the case, why men are not going to lead her out onstage instead of the women assistants, and Ron assumes she is making a joke. Kim asks why the annual guests on the show are called Consumers, and when she offers another name, Ron assumes she is joking again. Kim asks if she can meet the host, Mr. Crystal, but Ron stalls, saying that the host is very busy— although he will see what he can do.

At the ten-minute mark, the Presidents of the world's five regions will come out and praise Kim for her courage, and then the host will explain to the audience how the Lottery works. The Lottery— which is involuntary this year for the first time—is how Kim was chosen for this show. Kim was obviously chosen for the show against her will—but Ron dismisses this concern. The Presidents will give Kim a plaque, which is to be given to her parents after the show. They will watch a presentation from a group of Native People, who will praise the fact that science is no longer humanity's enemy. Kim will walk out to the center of the stage with the host.

At the twenty-minute mark, the President of the International Institute will bring out the Donut in a paper sack. He will present a sad video—showing the pollution problems and environmental consequences that people faced in the past—followed by the glad video, which praises science and explains how they are able to contain all of the year's toxic wastes and pollutants into one super-concentrated donut. The President will hand the bag with the donut to Kim and then go backstage again. Ron tells Kim that, at the end of the show, she will need to pull the donut out of the bag. Kim asks what she does with it then, and Ron thinks she is joking. Very seriously, he tells her that she is supposed to eat the donut. Kim does not realize until the end that she has been chosen, against her will, to sacrifice herself and save the environmental health of the world by eating the toxic donut.

Summary

"The Toxic Donut" is a science fiction story written by Terry Bisson. The innovative narrative style used by the author is one of the story's most outstanding attributes. Although at first it seems that Ron, the story's narrator, is speaking directly to the reader, it soon becomes evident that Ron is speaking to Kim, another character in the story. Kim does not speak directly back to Ron. Her responses and questions are implied by Ron's comments.

The story takes place during the rehearsal of a live, televised program. Kim is the guest of honour and Ron, as the host's chief administrative assistant, is helping her walk through the events of the show. The assistant tells Kim that he has been working for this particular annual program for six years. He begins by congratulating Kim on being chosen as the guest of honour. He tells her that she will be representing all living creatures on earth, perhaps even in the universe. He also tells her that the show is the most watched program on television, humorously stating that it has higher ratings than the Academy Awards. As a side note, he comments on the beloved Bill Murray, as though he is no longer living. This statement indicates that the story is set in the future.

Kim's title as guest of honour is "consumer." Ron admits that he doesn't know the reason behind this name, even though this title becomes self-explanatory when the purpose for Kim's presence is revealed at the end of the narrative. As Ron begins the step-by-step walk through of the evening's events, he informs Kim that the show begins with a song, "Here comes the Sun," sung by the Children's Rainbow Chorus. The host is the next person to enter the stage. Ron refers to him as Mr. Crystal, likely in reference to Billy Crystal, who often hosts the Academy Awards. Ron asks where Kim is from and responds that he didn't know they spoke English 'there.' He then states that her residence was British for years. This comment implies that Kim possibly lives in a future England that is no longer primarily British.

The next step in the program involves the introduction of the presidents of the "Common market." These include representatives from the African Federation, the Americas, the Pacific Rim and others. Following these introductions is a statement of how the lottery works. Here readers discover that Kim has not volunteered to be the show's guest of honour. Kim is chosen through a worldwide lottery system, which allows consumers to buy tickets for other people. Someone else bought her ticket.

As the program moves forward, the "presidents" present a plaque that is taken to Kim's family. Next is the "Native People's Presentation," a dance and musical performance which concludes with Kim being handed a bark scroll. Ron warns Kim not to open the scroll. Afterward, the host comes out again to introduce the president of the International Institute of Environmental Sciences. This man walks out with the donut, which is carried in a white paper sack and is not yet visible. He sets it on the podium in front of him. He gives a speech about the evils of science that is accompanied by a video that demonstrates the destructive nature of science in respect to waste, pollution and other damage that humans have inflicted on the planet. Ron tells Kim she does not have to



watch the video, but she should look concerned. The first video is followed with a second video and speech. The second speech emphasizes the wonders of science and how it has led to positive progress. The speech also explains how scientists discovered how to collect and contain a year's worth of toxic waste and pollution and keep it out of the environment. Kim asks how the scientists do this, but Ron states he doesn't know; he just knows that all the waste is concentrated into a single donut.

Ron explains that as the ceremony ends, Kim will be handed the bag with the donut. A drum role will commence. Kim asks what the donut will look like. Ron tells her it looks like any other donut; for example, it will be glazed if that is what she requested. Kim asks Ron what happens next. Ron laughs, thinking she is making a joke and tells her that what happens next is she eats the donut.

Analysis

"The Toxic Donut" is part of a collection of science fiction short stories written by Terri Bisson called "Bear Discovers Fire." In the Afterword to the text, the author explains that she first got the idea for the story when she heard about a highly polluted circular area of Chicago that is referred to as "the toxic donut." In Bisson's brief, but highly suspenseful tale, one woman is chosen through a lottery to be the sole consumer of the world's annual waste production. All of the earth's toxins have been contained inside one toxic donut that the woman is meant to eat during a ceremony on live television program. The story is largely a commentary about the trivialities of contemporary life that tend to hold too much weight in our society. Issues such as corporate power, celebrities, and the impact of consumerism are all present in the narrative. Bisson cleverly disguises these ideas in an intriguing, well-written science fiction tale.

There are indications that "The Toxic Donut" takes place in the future, but it is difficult to decipher how far into the future. There are some contradictions, which leave the reader wondering whether the author's pop culture references indicate that such an event could be right around the corner, or if she is hinting at the permanence of pop culture. There is an early reference that mentions Bill Murray in remembrance, an actor who is alive in present day. As the assistant describes the ceremony to Kim, he tells her that the introductory song is "Here comes the Sun." Ron also tells Kim that the host will ask her some questions similar to Jeopardy, a popular twentieth-century game show. Far from our expectations of the future, in the story humans have still not discovered life on other planets. Ron tells Kim she may, in fact, be representing all life in the universe.

The fact that celebrity interest still prevails in this futuristic story serves as a symbol of our present cultural values. Ron's emphasis on the fact that Kim should feel honored to be chosen points a finger at society's arbitrary obsession with fame. Kim's position as the chosen lottery winner reflects the late Andy Warhol's declaration that everybody will have his or her fifteen minutes of fame.

Throughout the narrative the host asks Kim, "Can I call you Kim," three separate times. This humorous add-in helps to characterize a stereotype of distracted television



executives. Ron plays down a major event in Kim's life, that being her death, as a simple part of his job. He is desensitized. Also, Ron tells Kim that she does not have to watch the environmental destruction video but should pretend to look concerned. This symbolises the insincere nature of the media industry and likelihood of corruption within public relations. Public relations is a widely-used tool in modern society where corporate entities and celebrities go through the motions of committing "good deeds," when, in fact, the true motive is to appear to be socially responsible.

In this story the world's leaders are called the "Presidents of the Common Market." This title implies that political strength relies wholly on a mutual trade agreement. Alike to the realities of modern society, commerce and consumerism are at the center of this fictional society. This is a symbol of the emphasis of capitalism in contemporary culture.

The guest of honor's title of "consumer" reaches far beyond the fact that Kim will be consuming the Toxic Donut. The entire program is a consumer affair. The event is a disturbing Bread and Circuses type occasion, where the entire world tunes in to watch the lottery winner die. The program is explicitly described as a corporate event. Ron states, "The corporations themselves don't make a presentation. They want to keep a very low profile." Likewise, when Ron explains the speech about scientists containing a year's worth of toxic waste in a donut, he notes that the collections refer to the fiscal year. This is an additional symbol of a corporate regime.

Bisson's story considerably utilizes "unbelievable" events to address the current social order as a facade. Media presentations, albeit introduced as news or simply for entertainment, contain an internal life. The viewer gets caught up in the output of a deceptive machine and is often subjected to altered details developed under the PR notion that everything should be presented with an attractive "spin." It is perhaps this author's intent to use the story as a wake up call, beckoning to us as more than readers, asking us as members of society to seek out the full story.



Characters

Kim

Kim is a Consumer, the one human sacrifice who has been chosen by a worldwide lottery to eat the toxic donut—a super-concentrated pastry made from all of humanity's toxic pollution and waste from the previous year. This sacrificial act is going to take place at an annual awards show, which will be televised live that evening. In the story, Ron, the administrative assistant for the show, walks Kim through the rehearsal. As Ron explains how the show works, the reader finds out that, unlike previous years, this year's lottery was involuntary. Throughout the story, Bisson does not reveal why Kim is on the show. This ambiguity is magnified by the fact that only Ron's part of the dialogue is revealed—Kim is not heard.

However, although the reader never hears exactly what Kim is saying, her part of the dialogue can be reconstructed through Ron—who repeats many of her statements and questions and who gives distinctive responses that indicate the nature of what Kim might be saying. By examining Ron's responses to Kim, the reader can get a better picture of Kim's background and experience. Ron is surprised to find out that Kim speaks English, given the country that she is from—which is never stated. However, since he says that the country used to be British, Kim is most likely from some region that was colonized by England or the United States. Kim has been chosen for the lottery against her will, because somebody bought a ticket for her. Throughout the story, Kim has some doubts about being on the show, but the reader does not find out why until the end of the rehearsal—which is also the end of the story. At this point, both the reader and Kim realize that she is supposed to sacrifice her life by eating the toxic donut.

Ron

Ron is the Chief Administrative Assistant of Mr. Crystal, the host of the annual television show where Kim, a Consumer, is going to sacrifice her life and save the environment by eating the toxic donut. Ron is the only one who speaks in the story, although his responses to Kim indicate the types of things that she is saying. In the story, Ron walks Kim—and the reader—through the rehearsal for the half-hour television show. From the beginning, Ron is all business, giving Kim a minute-by-minute rundown and rushing her through each part of the rehearsal. Ron is interested only in getting the rehearsal over with, to the point that he quickly dismisses Kim's questions and concerns—which he often mistakes as jokes. Because of this, and because he thinks that everybody knows about the show, Ron attributes Kim's ignorance of the sacrifice to her sense of humor.

Ron sees the show itself as more important than Kim's sacrifice—so much so that he is not even able to promise that Kim will be able to meet Mr. Crystal before the show. To Ron, everything is about maintaining the show's schedule and image, so Ron does not

even really pay attention to the content of the annual telecast. As a result, when he is walking Kim through the rehearsal, he is unable to give her specific details about many parts of the show, such as how the lighting is going to work or how scientists are able to compress all of the world's wastes into one small donut. This uncaring attitude extends to the treatment of Kim, and Ron is very cold and emotionally detached, glossing over potentially painful topics, such as the fact that at the end of the show, Kim is expected to sacrifice herself.

Themes

Environmentalism

The main theme of "The Toxic Donut" is concern for the destruction of earth's environment. While the story takes place in the future, after humanity has devised a solution for environmental destruction, Ron, the administrative assistant, talks about humanity's past—in other words, the time in which Bisson and his readers live: "I mean it all really happened! Dead rivers, dead birds, dioxins." In Ron's time, environmentalism is a worldwide concern, so much so that there is an "International Institute of Environmental Sciences." As Ron notes, Kim represents "everybody in the world who cares about the environment, and these days that includes everybody." However, instead of trying to minimize pollution, as today's environmentalists advocate, the futuristic human society in the story is free to produce as much toxic waste as it wants, since at the end of the year, it can be compressed into one donut with one human sacrifice designated to eat it.

Science and Technology

Like many science fiction stories, "The Toxic Donut" includes several references to science and technology, the most overt of which is the nanotechnology that is used to compress all of the world's toxic wastes into a single donut. As Ron says, the president of the International Institute of Environmental Sciences will give "the Wonders of Science rap, where he explains how they have managed to collect and contain all the year's toxic wastes, pollutants, etc., and keep them out of the environment—." However, while science is viewed positively on the television show, the depiction in the story is a negative one, as human values and the importance of individual human lives are both sacrificed for the greater good of technology. Toxic waste and pollution is generally a by-product of technological production. In the story, Bisson singles out the large manufacturing corporations that create much of this waste, although he does it in a subtle way. In response to one of Kim's unheard questions, Ron says, "No, the corporations themselves don't make a presentation. They want to keep a very low profile." The companies in Bisson's story do not want to be linked to their pollution or to the sanctioned murder that is necessary to make up for it.

Entertainment

In Ron's futuristic society, watching a human sacrifice himself or herself on live television is considered entertainment. As Ron notes, "everybody watches it anyway. More than watch the Academy Awards. Eight to ten points more. A point is about thirteen million people these days, did you know that?" Ron is concerned only with the entertainment value of Kim's death and with the success of the television show that will broadcast it live. Kim's death itself is given little importance outside of the show. For



example, in one of Kim's unheard questions, she asks whether or not she can meet the host. Ron responds, "Well—of course—maybe— tonight right before the show, if time allows. But you have to understand, Mr. Crystal's a very busy man, Kim." The host's schedule is ranked a higher priority than Kim's life, even though it is Kim who is saving humanity by making her sacrifice. Kim's lack of importance is emphasized even more by the fact that, for part of the half-hour television show, she will be waiting on the side of the stage. In addition, when she is officially honored, it is short. Says Ron, "There's a brief statement; nothing elaborate. 'Your great courage, protecting our way of life' sort of thing."

Style

Satire

Satire is a form of humor that comments on a social situation by portraying it in an unflattering or absurd manner. Using satire to comment on a situation is often more effective than merely discussing the issue directly, since satire tends to leave lasting, humorous images in a reader's mind. It is ludicrous to imagine that a society could condense the sum total of a year's toxic waste and pollution to the size of a donut. However, Bisson makes this laughable idea a reality in a future society so that he can point out some real issues, such as the problem of consumption, which is closely linked to pollution. Currently, humans in industrialized countries are consuming many of earth's natural resources faster than these resources can be replenished. Some of these resources are used by corporations to manufacture products, and the by-products of this manufacturing are the source of much toxic pollution. These products are in turn sold to the public, who are often referred to as consumers because of their financial value to corporations. In other words, many of the corporations that are polluting earth exist only to feed the growing human consumption of various products. Because of this, it makes sense that Bisson chooses to have the television show refer to Kim—and the other annual human sacrifices—as "Consumers."

Monologue

Monologue The entire story consists of one long section of monologue from Ron. It becomes clear in the beginning of the story that Ron is the only one whom the reader will hear speak. In the first paragraph, Ron says, "Let me begin, at the risk of seeming weird, by saying congratulations." However, in the beginning of the next paragraph, Ron says, "Of course I know. I've been doing this show every year for six years; how could I not know?" The reader may be confused at first by gaps like this, which occur throughout the story. Ron is responding to questions and statements from Kim, which Bisson has not included, as an author would in a normal, two-sided conversation, or dialogue. The use of this type of conversational monologue affects the exposition—the method by which a writer informs the reader of what is going on in the story. Kim's half of the dialogue must be reconstructed or inferred from Ron's responses, which, in turn, encourages the reader to look more closely at the story.

Foreshadowing

Bisson does not reveal until the very end of the story that Kim is supposed to kill herself on the television show by consuming the donut. Says Ron, "Okay. We all know what happens next . . . You eat it." However, even though this fact is not revealed to both Kim and Bisson's readers until the end, the author foreshadows Kim's death several times in the story. Foreshadowing is a technique that an author uses to give clues as to what



might happen later in the story. In "The Toxic Donut," Ron does this many times. Says Ron, "Did you, I mean do you have a family?" His speaking about Kim in the past tense alerts the reader that there might be some reason Kim will not be around at the end of the story. On a similar note, Ron tells Kim that, during the show, the presidents will "have a plaque that goes to your family after." Since the plaque will not be going to Kim, there is more reason to suspect that something bad is going to happen to her.



Historical Context

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, environmentalism was on the rise. Although the Environmental Protection Agency and the first Earth Day were both in 1970 and there were miscellaneous environmental disasters and planning initiatives in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was not until the mid-1980s that things really started to heat up—both literally and figuratively. In 1985, the *Rainbow Warrior*, the flagship of the nonviolent, environmental pressure group Greenpeace, was bombed and sunk by French government agents in Auckland Harbor, New Zealand. Greenpeace had been trying to protest French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. Fernando Pereira, a Dutch photographer, was killed in the aftermath of the explosion. The same year, British meteorologists confirmed their earlier suspicion that there was a hole in earth's ozone layer over Antarctica. The hole was created from chemicals like chlorofluorocarbons, which at the time were being widely used in commercial products such as aerosol spray cans. In 1986, a nuclear power plant at Chernobyl in the Ukraine had a full-scale meltdown, leaking toxic radiation into the surrounding area. The same year, a chemical warehouse in Basel, Switzerland, had a massive fire, which caused more than one thousand tons of toxic chemicals to be dumped into the Rhine River. The accident killed much of the river's wildlife and contaminated drinking water supplies. These and other incidents helped to ignite the public's passion and gave some bargaining power to environmental activists.

However, it was not until 1989 that the public really started to get involved. On March 24, 1989, the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* crashed into an underwater reef, dumping more than ten million gallons of oil into the pristine waters of Alaska's Prince William Sound. This oil spill spread quickly, killing wildlife and causing years of ecological damage. Environmentalists were starting to gain a greater foothold before this disaster, but the incident ignited a public outcry and led to massive media coverage of all environmental issues. These included pollution, deforestation, acid rain, the widespread use of landfills and incinerators, overpopulation, and wildlife extinction. One of the biggest issues that concerned both environmentalists and the general public in the late 1980s was the greenhouse effect—also known as global warming. The greenhouse effect is the gradual warming of earth's atmosphere, which is caused when an increasing amount of the sun's heat reaches earth's surface. Normally, earth's atmosphere radiates much of the sun's heat back into space. However, when certain gases—most notably, carbon dioxide—build up in the atmosphere, the gases reflect the sun's extra heat back onto earth's surface. Environmentalists warned that if the rate of deforestation in developing areas like South America and the worldwide consumption of natural resources continued to rise, so would earth's temperature.

Global warming was one of the key topics discussed at the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development, a meeting in Brazil that brought together delegates from more than 170 nations. Although this massive environmental forum, known as the Earth Summit, opened up international discussion on many environmental issues, some prominent leaders like former president George Bush proclaimed that there was not

enough scientific evidence to justify restrictions on the use of natural resources. As a result, no binding treaties came out of the conference.

Critical Overview

Although Bisson's first science fiction novel was written in 1980, he did not receive widespread critical acclaim until the early 1990s, when he began to publish science fiction short stories in magazines. In 1993, he collected a number of these stories into *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*. In a 1993 review of the collection for *Kirkus Reviews*, the reviewer notes of Bisson that "at his best, he combines a splendidly loopy inventiveness with real poignancy, a hard-edged sense of wonder and a grasp of the genuinely alien." Other 1993 reviews of the collection are equally favorable. A critic from *Publishers Weekly* notes "the astonishing range of Bisson's talent" and calls Bisson "one of science fiction's most promising short story practitioners."

Within the collection, most reviewers single out the award-winning title story, "Bears Discover Fire," as worthy of the highest praise. Says Martha Soukup in her 1993 *Washington Post Book World* review, the collection "is worth it for the title story alone." Soukup includes this tale in the category of "Bisson's homier tales of people living on in a world that can change itself more than it can change them." Nevertheless, critics still enjoy "The Toxic Donut," a story that falls into Soukup's category of "very brief japes," which she says can be read "as transcripts of sketch comedy." The story is one of the collection's three environmental stories. The *Publishers Weekly* critic notes of this trio of stories that they "address environmental concerns with a black humor that enhances rather than mitigates their impact." Likewise, the reviewer from *Kirkus* labels it as one of the many "agreeably batty commentaries" in the collection. In fact, reviewers have often noted the humorous aspects of Bisson's writing, to the point that in his entry on Bisson in the *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*, Paul Kincaid labels Bisson as "a humorist." In addition to Bisson's critical success, he has also enjoyed favor with popular audiences, who appreciate his brand of humorous science fiction.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the relative unimportance of Kim's involuntary sacrifice in Bisson's story, while exploring the sinister implications of the act.

Kim is expected to sacrifice herself for the benefit of the entire world, something that Ron alludes to in the beginning of the story when he says, "You have been chosen to represent all humanity for one evening." However, Kim's sacrifice is involuntary; she has not chosen to die. In one of her unheard statements, Kim notes this. Ron responds, saying, "I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm sure voluntary would be better. But somebody must have bought you a ticket; that's the way it works."

Although Ron and the producers of the television show go to great lengths to conceal it, Kim's sacrifice is relatively unimportant, a fact that readers can see when they dig beneath the surface of the story. Bisson encourages his readers to do just this, through the use of several cues. First of all, there is the nature of the sacrifice itself. The idea of a person sacrificing himself or herself to save humanity is present in many cultures throughout history, one notable example being the Christian religion—Jesus Christ's willing death on the cross. In this case, however, the producers of the toxic donut show — and indeed the human world who supports this sacrifice—are making a mockery of the act. Kim's forced sacrifice is neither divine, since it is not done to save humanity's souls, nor eternal, since it only saves humanity for one year. Despite this fact, everybody involved with the show gives the act an increased importance. Says Ron at the beginning of the rehearsal, "You are, for one half hour tonight, the representative of all life on the planet. Hell, all life in the Universe, as far as we know."

Yet, even in this statement, Bisson is having Ron undercut the importance of Kim's death. Kim is supposedly the representative of everybody and everything—but only for "one half hour." In fact, the half-hour format of the show, which also provides the structure for the rehearsal, helps lead a reader to understanding the real importance of Kim's sacrifice. Since Ron is all business and cares most about the show's success, he speeds through the rehearsal, giving a minute-by-minute breakdown of how the show will play out. For Ron, there is no time for small talk. At one point, in one of her unheard responses, Kim tries to remind Ron that they have already established what Mr. Crystal, the Host, should call her on the show. Ron is briefly apologetic and then goes back to his itinerary: "Okay. Anyway. A little ad-lib and it's 9:10. I have it all here on my clipboard, see? To the minute."

Ron is also unresponsive to many of Kim's concerns, such as the fact that she has been chosen against her will. Ron thinks that Kim is joking when she brings up such issues. For example, at one point, Kim asks why she and the other annual guests on the show are called "Consumers." Ron responds, asking, "What would you want us to call you?" Kim's response causes Ron to think that she is just being funny. Although it is impossible to guess exactly what Kim might have said, given the context of Ron's responses, one assumes that it is a derogatory name. Kim is obviously not happy. But



Ron's only concern—and the main concern of the producers—is to maintain the good image of the show, which, as he tells her, everybody watches. Says Ron, "More than watch the Academy Awards. Eight to ten points more. A point is about thirteen million people these days, did you know that?"

Bisson helps to underscore the importance of this image campaign by giving capitalized titles to many people and items on the show. To begin with, almost everybody in the story has a capitalized title that denotes his or her position. Mr. Crystal is "the Host," Ron is "the Host's Chief Administrative Assistant," there is going to be a presentation by the "Native People," and there is going to be a brief statement by the five "Presidents of the Common Market." Even Kim has a title—"Consumer." In addition to these actual titles or designations; however, there are some people and items that are capitalized, which normally would not be. For example, the women who lead people on and off the stage are called "the Girls," and the toxic pastry that Kim is expected to eat is called "the Donut." The effect of all of this capitalization is to give an added importance to the whole production. However, this importance is fake, just as all of the glitz and glamour of the show is fake. The trumped-up titles are merely an aspect of the television show's image, and—like Kim's death—hold no importance outside of the live production.

However, Kim cannot say much about her unimportance, because Bisson removes her dialogue. Bisson's use of a monologue, which he uses in other stories in the *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories* collection, is particularly effective here. As the story progresses, Kim's silence helps to underscore the urgency of the story, since the reader does not have to bounce back and forth between Ron and Kim's dialogue. As a result, Bisson pulls his readers quickly through the story. However, Kim's obvious problem over her involuntary selection and the excessive use of capitalization, among other clues, tip readers off, letting them know that they might want to go back and read between the lines. If readers do this, the real importance of the television show is revealed.

Bisson is making a statement with Kim's silence. She is already dead. She stands for the silent masses of people who are being killed, and who will be killed in the future if something is not done to address the toxic pollution problem. In the story, however, Kim's death is buried, just as the involvement of the businesses that ultimately kill her is buried. Says Ron, "No, the corporations themselves don't make a presentation. They want to keep a very low profile."

On the surface of the story, just as on the surface of this futuristic society, it appears that the environment is a top priority to everybody. Says Ron, ". . . everybody in the world who cares about the environment, and these days that includes everybody." However, once one examines the nature of Kim's sacrifice—and the glitzy television production that showcases it—it is apparent that businesses rule this world. The show tries to distract its viewers from this fact by including several traditional icons of environmentalism, such as colors, and by including aspects that are guaranteed to get an emotional response. The producers of the television show feature the rainbow, one of the symbols used in modern-day society to denote environmentalism. Ron tells Kim that "there will be one song from the International Children's Rainbow Chorus," an obvious ploy by the producers to use both children and the environment to tug at



viewers' heartstrings. Even more apparent than the rainbow, however, is the color green, which is synonymous with environmentalism. In the television show, the girls who help lead people on and off stage will be wearing "little green outfits." Also, there are "green marks" on the stage designating where "the President of the International Institute of Environmental Science"—whom Ron and the others call "the Green Meany"—will stand.

This widespread use of an established environmental color is recognizable to most readers. What may not be as apparent at first is the fact that green is also the color of money, at least in the United States. Once again, by reading in between the lines, the reader can see that in the case of this story, green stands for both. The environment has become big money for corporations. Many of the wastes that comprise the toxic donut are from technological corporations. When Kim eats the donut, she may be saving humanity and the environment for a year, but she is really preserving the corporations' ability to continue to serve the human desire for consumption—the by-products of which become toxic wastes. With Kim's sacrificial murder, the companies will now have free license to produce as much toxic waste over the next year as they need to make big money in their manufacturing operations. The whole television production is ruled by this very moneycentric idea, as evidenced by Ron's explanation about the year's worth of wastes that Kim is going to eat. Says Ron, "The fiscal year, by the way. That's why the Ceremony is tonight and not New Year's Eve." In fact, the story seems to imply that the corporations, who want to keep "a very low profile," are probably sponsoring the show. This is a small price to pay to avoid the types of expensive, image-damaging battles and economic sanctions that some corporations in Bisson's time had to contend with to continue dumping their hazardous wastes.

In the end, Bisson's message is simple. Many people are at fault for the current state of the environment, but unless everybody works to solve the problem, technology may come up with its own solution—one that involves sacrificing the individual consumer to save production.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Toxic Donut," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2003.



Critical Essay #2

Curt Guyette Guyette is a longtime journalist who received a bachelor's degree in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh. In this essay, Guyette discusses Bisson's use of satire as a literary device employed to draw attention to serious issues.

In his short story "The Toxic Donut," science fiction writer Terry Bisson effectively draws attention to a variety of important issues by employing the literary device of satire, which can be defined as using humor to ridicule vices, stupidities, or abuses. With remarkably spare prose, the author's sharp wit and pointed barbs are directed at the shallow nature of popular culture, secretive corporate control, the primitive bloodlust that shadows even the most technologically advanced societies, and, most significantly, a lifestyle of consumerism and waste that threatens the future of the entire planet.

"The Toxic Donut" is a deceptively simple story that must be read more than once if it is to be fully appreciated. Although amusing from the outset, the tale takes on a whole new level of poignancy, or significance, when the true fate of the character Kim is revealed in the story's final line. Once the reader learns that this woman must eat that toxic donut, is there any doubt she is the subject of a very public execution? The author foreshadows her predicament within the first two lines as the administrative assistant Ron suffers a slip of the tongue and refers to her in the past tense when he queries, "Did you, I mean do you have a family?" It is not until the concluding sentence, however, that the lethal purpose of her appearance on the show is made certain. The fact that the character Kim is doomed makes the black humor pervading this story even darker. Almost every line contains a satiric jab of some sort. For example, in the first reading, the fact that an International Rainbow Chorus provides the equivalent of a musical happy face by singing a lilting, optimistic tune by the Beatles titled "Here Comes the Sun" does not seem all that remarkable. But when seen as the prelude to a televised execution, the morbid irony of music that upbeat being played as a sort of processional to the gallows is overwhelming. Examples of this kind of satire permeate the story.

There is, however, more to this tale than dark comedy. When one looks at it closely, the story reveals itself to be a masterful work of art. Although it is impressive that Bisson can achieve so much in a piece so sparse, what elevates this accomplishment to an even higher level is that it serves as an ironic antithesis, or counterpoint, to what appears to be his main theme. In a story that warns mankind that it is at risk of killing itself with the excessive toxic waste it produces, Bisson does not waste a single word. Taking brevity to the extreme, he creates a story featuring just two characters, and only one of those is ever heard actually speaking. He achieves this in large part by merely outlining the subjects of his satire without filling in the details. Think of the targets found at shooting ranges that are simply the black silhouette of a human form. That's the way Bisson handles this story. He does not dwell on the subjects being stung by his jibes; instead, he merely alludes to them, letting the reader fill in all the implications. Take, for example, this passage in the story where Ron tells Kim:



You're the first woman in two years, by the way; the last two consumers were men. I don't know why, consumers is just what we call them; I mean, call you. What would you want us to call you?

Those few lines accomplish so much. For one thing, the brief passage reveals how little value is being placed on human life in this world Bisson depicts. Kim is no longer seen as a person; she is simply a consumer. The description can be interpreted in a strictly literal sense: she will actually consume that toxic donut as the climax of the gamelike show upon which she appears. But the idea of her as a consumer can also be viewed in a much broader way as a metaphor that implies deeper meaning. After all, as the author tells readers at the outset of the story, Kim represents all of mankind. In that context, consumerism dovetails perfectly with this story's overarching concern with the issue of pollution and its lethal potential. In a throwaway society, consumption and waste are inevitably bound together. Evidence of this is everywhere, from fuelinef ficient cars that create poisonous carbon monoxide when gasoline is "consumed," to the prevalence of items like disposable razors, which are used a few times then discarded, ending up in municipal trash incinerators that spew from their smokestacks pollutants such as the dioxin Bisson mentions. But the author does not bog down his story exploring these sorts of tangents. The same is true when it comes to pollution and the role corporations play in the problem. Bisson does not launch into a diatribe attacking companies that wield so much power over the direction society takes, and play such a large role in creating the pollution that poses such a threat. Instead, he refers to them only once, in an almost offhand manner, introducing the subject with an unheard question from Kim and Ron's response: "What? No, the corporations themselves don't make a presentation. They want to keep a very low profile." And that is it. The issue raised, Bisson is content to let the cryptic reference end there, with all its implications of string-pulling corporations left hanging, hovering like a shadow. It is almost like a game of tag. Bisson quickly hits on one theme, then moves on to the next.

There are certain issues, however, that emerge throughout the story. It is as if Bisson is using satire as a microscope that allows us to examine society in ways we don't usually see it. Although this takes place in the future, it is not at all distant. Published in 1993, this story was written at a time when newscasts were already providing frightening predictions from many scientists warning about the potential threat of global warming being caused by polluting greenhouse gases. And as far back as the 1950s, writers such as Rachel Carson were raising alarm over the threat which pesticides and other toxic chemicals posed to both human beings and nature as a whole. So the problems the author focuses on are not at all remote. Compounding the problem is what Bisson apparently sees as a lack of urgency on the part of society at large to understand and deal with the issue. This attitude is reflected in the way Ron describes the part of the program portraying the "evils of science." A video depicting poisoned rivers and dead animals accompanies the presentation. But for Ron, it is all just part of the show. That attitude is made perfectly clear when he tells Kim: "You don't have to watch if you don't want to. Just look concerned, alarmed, whatever." And when he is asked by Kim how it is that science is able to condense a years worth of toxic waste into one donut, Ron replies, "I don't know exactly. I never listen to the technical part. Some kind of sub molecular-nano-mini-mumbo-jumbo."



Ron and the show he works for are the epitome of a shallow culture. Almost everything about it is slick and fabricated and false. Presidents are scheduled to present Kim with a plaque honoring her for her courage, but she is warned not to touch it. Native-American performers will give her a bark scroll, but she is cautioned not to try and unroll it. Obviously, it is fake. And while this is happening, a wind machine will be providing the illusion of nature. However, despite all the phoniness, the main feature of the show could not be more real, and the resulting popularity is quite telling. Despite living in a society so technologically advanced it can compress uncounted tons of toxic waste from across the planet into a single pastry, the people inhabiting this world still have not evolved. What could be more primitive than a ritual human sacrifice? As Ron tells her, for this one night Kim represents all humanity, all life on the planet, perhaps the entire universe for all he knows. Like some sacrificial lamb being led to the slaughter, Kim will eat this donut and, in a way that is both symbolic and quite literal, suffer the consequences that would otherwise be shared by all the inhabitants of this world. And what is the public's response to this? Morbid fascination on a global scale. Viewers tune in by the millions to watch the spectacle of it all. The big moment arrives with the fanfare of a drum roll. Even someone as crass as Ron cannot help but be moved by the moment, with the camera pulling slowly in on the subject, standing there alone, clutching a white, grease-stained bag holding all the world's poison.

Bisson ends the story with a punch line that hits hard. It is really a message to every reader who, like Kim, continues moving inevitably toward a lethal end, cracking jokes all the way up to the last moment. As with all good satire, the underlying message being conveyed is completely serious. In fact, the moral of this story can rightfully be said to be of life and death importance. Continue on this course, Bisson seems to be saying, and the world will present to each of us a life filled with toxic donuts, and there will be no choice but to follow the instructions Ron gives Kim: "You eat it."

Source: Curt Guyette, Critical Essay on "The Toxic Donut," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

"The Toxic Donut" was adapted by Bisson as a stage play and produced at West Bank Theatre in New York from 1992 to 1993, along with five other stories from *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*—"Two Guys from the Future," "They're Made out of Meat," "Next," "Are There Any Questions?" and "Partial People." The script for "The Toxic Donut," which can be found on the World Wide Web at <http://www.terrybisson.com/donutplay.html> (last accessed January 2003), features both characters, as the story does. However, in the stage play, Bisson has Kim mouth her words silently, to achieve the same monologue effect as the story.

"The Toxic Donut" was also adapted by Bisson as an online audio drama for the Sci-Fi Channel's Seeing Ear Theatre. The play was directed by Brian Smith and features Peter Coyote as Ron and Rebecca Nice as a character named Bound N' Gagged. The downloadable audio file of the play, which is available for free at <http://www.scifi.com/set/playhouse/meat/> (last accessed January 2003), also includes two other audio dramas by Bisson—"They're Made out of Meat" and "Next." Like "The Toxic Donut," both of these plays are based on stories from *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories*. The three audio dramas are also available under the title "Three Odd Comedies" on an abridged audiocassette entitled *Seeing Ear Theatre: A Sci-Fi Channel Presentation*, which was released by Dove Books Audio in 1998.



Topics for Further Study

Imagine that you are a television producer in the year 2050. Research projected forecasts from sociologists, economists, environmentalists, and others to get a picture of what life might be like in this era. Develop an idea for a new television show that captures the spirit of this future time, using your research to support your ideas.

When Bisson wrote his story, environmentalism was a key public issue, and many regular citizens became activists by conserving resources, reusing items whenever possible, and recycling items when done with them. Research the state of environmentalism today, and discuss how these community efforts have or have not made a difference in helping to heal and protect the Earth's damaged environment. If they have not made much of a difference, give some reasons why.

On the southeast side of Chicago, there is a public housing project called Altgeld Gardens, but the locals have dubbed it the "Toxic Donut," since there are a number of landfills, sewage treatment plants, steel mills, and toxic chemical factories that surround it. Research the history behind this region, and discuss whether or not you think the title of Bisson's story had an effect on the nickname, or vice versa, using your research to support your claims.

Pick one environmental issue, other than toxic pollution, that is a cause for concern today. Research the details behind this issue, and plot the major events in this issue's history—such as disasters, court rulings, and public-awareness campaigns—on a time line.

Research the current legislation that regulates the dumping of toxic wastes. What kinds of restrictions are imposed on companies that dump toxic materials, and what kinds of penalties do companies have to pay when they violate these restrictions? Discuss whether you think these restrictions should be more or less strict and why you feel this way.



What Do I Read Next?

Douglas Adams is widely considered to be one of the funniest science fiction writers ever, and his *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), the first in a multivolume series, is a classic satirical science fiction work. The story centers around the interstellar mishaps and adventures of Arthur Dent, a human who is transported off earth right before its destruction by an interplanetary construction crew—which plans to build an interstellar freeway. Dent's companions include an alien, Ford Prefect; a chronically depressed robot, Marvin; and a computer travel guide.

Like the successful Bears Discover *Fire and Other Stories*, Bisson's second short story collection, *In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories* (2000), addresses a wide range of topics, including the danger of technology, virtual reality, and cloning. The collection also includes his award-winning short story, "macs," which takes the idea of victim's rights to a chilling extreme.

In the satirical novel *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990), Bisson creates a futuristic world where, thanks to a massive economic depression, government services have been sold to private corporations. A movie producer named Markson leaves on a long voyage to Mars to shoot a film, but when the corporation in charge of mission control runs short on money and turns their attention elsewhere, Markson's ship goes offcourse, and he and his crew get stranded.

The end of the world, by man-made or natural disasters, has been a favorite topic of science fiction writers for the last century. *In Bangs and Whimpers: Stories about the End of the World* (1999), editor James Frenkel collects nineteen apocalypse tales by noted authors, including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Connie Willis, and Robert Heinlein.

Stephen King first published his novel *The Running Man* in 1982, under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. The book depicts a futuristic society, in which television entertainment has become very deadly. In the story, Ben Richards, a desperate father who cannot afford medicine for his sick infant, enters himself in a battery of life-or-death contests, which yield big cash prizes for survivors. Richards is assigned to *The Running Man* game, in which he must run to survive, while being hunted down by bounty hunters.

Pollution: Opposing Viewpoints (2000), edited by Tamara L. Roleff, collects contradictory arguments on various aspects of pollution. The thirty-one essays in the book fall into five question categories, which ask the contributors whether pollution is a serious problem, whether chemical pollutants pose a health risk, whether recycling is an effective response to pollution, how air pollution can be reduced, and how pollution should be managed.

Duff Wilson, an investigative journalist for the *Seattle Times*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his hard-hitting series on hazardous wastes. In *Fateful Harvest: The*

True Story of a Small Town, a Global Industry, and a Toxic Secret (2001), Wilson draws on this series of articles, as well as real-life case studies from a small town in Washington State, to show how some companies are disposing of toxic wastes by including them in fertilizer.



Further Study

Further Reading American Association for the Advancement of Science, *AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment*, University of California Press, 2001.

This in-depth guide depicts the relationships between human population and the environment. The book employs a number of maps, diagrams, and other visual aids to explore the links between population and natural resources, land use, atmosphere, waste and chemicals, ecosystems, and biodiversity.

Brown, Michael, and John May, *The Greenpeace Story*, Dorling Kindersley, 1991.

This book gives a comprehensive overview of Greenpeace, the nonviolent environmental pressure group that was founded in the 1970s. Illustrations and photographs accompany each section of the book, which covers the organization's history, its major initiatives, and the various retaliations it has experienced from international governments and industry.

Rischar, J. F., *High Noon: Twenty Global Problems, Twenty Years to Solve Them*, Basic Books, 2002.

Rischar, the World Bank's vice-president for Europe and a noted economist, defines what he sees as the twenty most pressing environmental issues. He proposes a system of global networks—which can monitor illegal environmental activity—to address these concerns.

Santos, Miguel A., *The Environmental Crisis*, Greenwood Press, 1999.

This highly informative book offers a good, one-volume introduction to the history of the environmental crisis, as well as the efforts made in the twentieth century to address this crisis. The book explains the science behind key environmental issues, such as global warming and pollution, and provides an indepth chronological time line of major environmental events.

Wolf, Michael J., *The Entertainment Economy: How the Mega-Media Forces Are Transforming Our Lives*, Times Books, 1999.

Wolf, a top strategist in the media industry, states that all businesses, regardless of type, will need to entertain their customers in the future—since the public is obsessed with entertainment. Wolf cites many examples, such as CNBC network and Tommy Hilfiger, to show how certain businesses have learned this lesson and thrived. He also gives many inside stories about the media industry.

Worldwatch Institute, ed., *State of the World 2002*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2002.

The latest edition of this annual report gives the most up-to-date research statistics concerning the state of the earth and its environment. Topics covered include global

governance, agriculture, resource conflicts, toxic wastes, population, and global warming, among others. This is an indispensable source book for all environmental studies.



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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.

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□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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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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