

Trust and Victories Short Guide

Trust and Victories by George V. Higgins

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Characters

Although Earl Beale, the protagonist of *Trust* is a native of Occident, Vermont, the action is set primarily in Massachusetts, and it offers a broader range of characters from the wealthy to the poor. *Victories* makes a single excursion to the Boston office of the political consultant; most of the characters are tied to the vicinity of Occident, and none are as wealthy as Simmons or as dislocated as Earl. *Victories* does include scenes of Congressman Wainwright's Washington, DC.

A number of the characters play roles in both novels. Don Beale, the Occident car dealer, appears briefly in *Trust*, expressing his distrust of his brother, but nonetheless accepting Earl's assurances that the Mercedes, which is stolen, is not (his sale of the car is mentioned in both novels). Don takes a major role in supporting the candidacy of Henry Briggs in *Victories*.

Ed Cobb, the Vermont Assembly Speaker who prompts Briggs to run, also appears in *Trust*. He provides a key connection in both novels. When Earl Beale is released from prison, Cobb, as a favor to Don Beale, arranges to have Earl's criminal record hidden; in return, he has Don ask Earl to assist the motel owner by "stealing" and destroying the Mercedes. The motel owner can ask Cobb to arrange this because he had done Cobb a favor by covering up a death in his motel.

Henry Briggs and a fellow player had gone to the motel with two girls, and one of the girls had died of alcohol poisoning. The connections between the characters of the two novels are thus complicated (and there are further complications); but the novels do not require one another; each stands alone.



Social Concerns/Themes

Victories, according to its blurb, is the "companion novel" to Trust.

The relationship between the two is peculiar: both are set in the same period (fall-winter 1967 to 1968); significant characters appear in both novels; and the plots overlap in minor ways; yet each is an autonomous work. Victories is not a sequel to Trust.

Trust focuses upon the experience of Earl Beale, another example of Higgins's patented type, the loquacious grifter. Earl is a college basketball player who was caught and imprisoned for fixing games. Now, in late 1967, Earl sells used cars and schemes to exploit his girlfriend's sometime occupation as a rich man's mistress. Returning a favor for someone who has done him a favor, he also gets involved in a scheme to protect a philandering judge by stealing and destroying the judge's Mercedes. Both schemes go awry: Earl has sufficient street smarts to sell used cars (and to cheat the dealer), but he lacks the larger vision to execute his grand schemes. He ends the novel in prison; Penny, his sharp girlfriend, and Allen Simmons, her sharp and wealthy lover, both end the novel undamaged.

Trust thus provides a fine illustration of Higgins's ability to produce authentic depictions of the language and the worldviews of men like Earl Beale; it also illustrates his more recent interest in the habits of the privileged. Allen Simmons plays a small, but significant role in the novel. The main theme is declared in the title: Trust. Simmons trusts his wife, his mistress, his lawyer, his company's security men; he occupies a commanding position in society, and, justifiably, he trusts the system to preserve that position. Car buyers, his brother, the motel owner, Penny all unwisely trust Earl; Earl unwisely trusts no one, always seeking to gain the slight or the large advantage offered by deception. And there are other sorts of loyalties and betrayals in the novel. The variations on this theme make Trust a satisfying and coherent novel.

Victories is less satisfying. The main character here is Henry Briggs, a relief pitcher who has returned to small town Vermont after almost fifteen years in the major leagues. Henry is a decent guy; he is unhappy with his wife and his son (and happy with his daughter); he makes an honest living as a game warden. The main action concerns the efforts of Ed Cobb, Democratic Speaker of the Vermont Assembly, and Don Beale, a Vermont car dealer, to get Briggs into the 1968 race for U.S. Representative. Getting him to run occupies the entire novel. A few sentences in the final chapter (dated 1989) reveal that Briggs did win the election when the incumbent died on election eve; that he was re-elected to ten more terms, finally retiring to reap the rewards of his unspent campaign funds; that he married the beautiful, wealthy woman who appeared briefly when she adopted his candidacy as a project to invest herself in. Although individual episodes demonstrate that Higgins's art of authenticity works in rural Vermont as well as in Boston or Providence, the action of Victories seems insufficient and improbable.

Once again, the title implies the central theme. The issue of victory, and of the teamwork behind it, connects Henry Briggs the ex-pitcher (with a 122-68 lifetime record) and



Henry the would-be politician. (Set in the interval between these two careers, the novel never actually presents the pitcher or the politician.) Victory means one thing to the twenty-eight year Republican incumbent, a crusty, parsimonious old Vermonter, and something else to the Vermont Assembly speaker who aims to build a Democratic machine, or to the Boston political consultant who cannot afford a loss on his record, or to the down-home voters of Vermont's second congressional district.

The election in *Victories* turns more on personality than upon ideology; Higgins's long-standing interest in politics has always focussed more upon the nature of personal exercise of power (and upon the effects of power upon the personality) than upon issues.

But although Henry Briggs expresses no strong convictions about the Vietnam War, the war appears in the background of both novels; indeed, both end with the deaths of young men in Vietnam.

Techniques

Both novels illustrate Higgins's characteristic strengths: his use of vernacular language, his use of dialogue, his use of artfully natural narrative digressions and anecdotes, his sense of humor. In addition, *Trust* offers a satisfying criminal plot and a distinctive thematic coherence.

Because they are "companion" novels sharing some characters and transpiring at the same time, there is, additionally, the interesting element of a parallax view of events. Some of the parallels and connections have been mentioned. One more might be noted: At the end of *Trust*, as he deals with Earl's miscalculated attempt at blackmail, Allen Simmons learns of Ed Cobb's improper intervention to conceal Earl's record; at the end of *Victories*, Congressman Wainwright makes the same discovery. Both men might use the knowledge to advantage, Simmons to manipulate Earl, Wainwright to embarrass Cobb and Briggs. For different reasons, neither does. Higgins clearly intends readers to draw the contrast between the two situations. The device of "companion" novels thus permits Higgins to achieve new levels of narrative reference and resonance.



Key Questions

"Companion" novels are relatively rare. What advantages does Higgins claim by producing two short narratives that play off one another in the fashion of *Trust* and *Victories*? What would have been the difference if he melded the two narratives into a single, large volume?

1. Discuss the meanings of the two titles. Who "trusts" whom in *Trust* (And what are the consequences of trust?) Who achieves "victory" in *Victories*? (And what does "victory" mean?)

2. Which is the more successful novel? Why?

3. Robert B. Parker's *Playmates* (1989) deals with a situation similar to that which Higgins explores in *Trust*. Compare the two treatments.

4. Sports and politics are activities that often seem to share common qualities and even common metaphors.

Henry Briggs is a ball player turned politician. What connections does Higgins imply between these two arenas of competition?

5. What is the importance of the date of the two novels? Published in 1989 and 1990, they are deliberately set back nearly a quarter century. Why? The Vietnam War has no direct impact upon the stories, but it plays an important role in setting their context. What is the significance of the war?

6. Why does Higgins set these novels in Vermont instead of Massachusetts?

7. Higgins has made major moves toward including women's voices in his later novels, but women occupy distinctly minor positions in these novels.

What is the effect of this emphasis upon men here? What roles do women play?

8. In what ways do men acquire and exercise power in these novels? What kinds of power do they acquire and exercise?

Literary Precedents

The principal precedents of *Trust and Victories* are those of *Wonderful Years*, *Wonderful Years* (1988). Proletarian criminals continue to seed Higgins's plots; his main concerns remain character and language and the theme of power.



Related Titles

Trust and Victories demonstrate again that Higgins is an artful novelist as well as a popular one; further evidence of his seriousness appears in *On Writing: Advice for Those Who Write to Publish (Or Would Like To)* (1990), which evidently reflects the lessons which Higgins offers to his creative writing students. Its chapters consist of reprinted stories or passages preceded and followed by Higgins's pragmatic observations on the writer's intentions and achievements. The authors are largely those whom he admires — John O'Hara (especially), Hemingway, Lardner, Thurber, and Marquand (and, as well, Gay Talese and Irwin Shaw).

Chapter 6 is particularly interesting as it offers Higgins's explication of his own 1988 short story, "A Small Matter of Consumer Protection."



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994