The Truth about Lorin Jones Short Guide

The Truth about Lorin Jones by Alison Lurie

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

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

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Characters

Lorin Jones has been dead for years when the novel opens, so the reader must learn about her from the people Polly Alter interviews. A consequence of this technique is that the reader has only fragmented glimpses into Lorin's life. The "truth" of Lorin Jones, thus, is never satisfactorily realized. For example, Polly discovers that Lorin briefly disappeared as a child. When she was found, her panties were missing although she did not appear molested.

People who knew Lorin felt that this incident affected her personality, but it is not clear to what degree and in what way. The people that Polly interviews also agree that Lorin maintained a distance in her relationships with others, but they provide different explanations for that distance. Some refer to her single-minded obsession with her art; others refer to her shyness; still others refer to her arrogance. The reader learns interesting facts about Lorin — she once turned all the furnishings in her room backward or upside down; she maliciously gave her stepmother an abstract painting of her deceased mother; she kindly saved photography books for her niece — but the sum of these facts does not create an understanding of the motivation and values of Lorin Jones. The only characteristic of Lorin that is clearly portrayed is her obsession with art and her subsequent expectation that others in her life — particularly her lover Mac — share in that obsession.

Social Concerns/Themes

Lurie uses the plot of The Truth about Lorin Jones to explore the implications of the feminist movement that began in the 1960s and to criticize women who use the movement to denigrate men. Polly Alter, the major protagonist, is one of these misguided women. She begins researching the life of the dead painter Lorin Jones in order to prove an anti-male thesis: the men in Lorin's life, from her half brother to her husband to her lover, prevented her from realizing her full potential as an artist. What Polly discovers from her research is that Lorin was responsible for her own failing as an artist. She used mind-altering drugs and took unnecessary risks that led to an early death. Polly's recognition of Lorin's own culpability leads her, by the end of the novel, to a pro-male thesis: the men in Lorin's life, rather than oppressing her, were themselves oppressed by the artist's selfishness.

By embracing a new view of Lorin's career, Polly also reassesses her own lifestyle, specifically her relationship with a separatist feminist, Jeanne.

Jeanne distrusts all males, including Stevie, Polly's ingenuous teenaged son, and Mac, Lorin's former and Polly's current lover. Jeanne nearly convinces Polly of the inherent evil of males, but Polly's love for these two men and her new opinion of the men in Lorin's life lead her to reject Jeanne's viewpoint.

Thus, by the end of the novel, Polly has fully altered (a pun on her last name "Alter") her assessment of separatist feminism and has embraced a supposedly better understanding of Lorin Jones and her own desires. Unfortunately, the quality of this new understanding is suspect. Not only does the reader wonder if Polly is deluding herself about finding happiness with Mac in Florida, but the reader also suspects that Polly's new understanding of Lorin is faulty. At the end of the novel, Polly exonerates all the men in the artist's life, even Lorin's husband who clearly frustrated the artist's creative impulses when he tried to impose his own artistic theories on her work. A more convincing and accurate conclusion would be for Polly to believe that Lorin's failure as an artist is attributable to her own destructive lifestyle as well as interference from some men in her life.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Truth about Lorin Jones is a retelling of Henry James's nineteenth-century novel of social criticism, The Bostonians. (1886). In The Bostonians, Verena Tarrant, a lecturer, is caught between two forceful personalities: Olive Chancellor, a feminist who hates all males and is perhaps a lesbian, and Basil Ransom, a Southerner who wants Verena to live a conventional life as his wife. At the end of the novel, Verena chooses Ransom. In Lurie's novel, Polly Alter, a biographer, is also caught between two forceful personalities: Jeanne, a feminist lesbian who hates males, and Mac Cameron, the former lover of Lorin Jones. At the end of the novel, Polly, like Verena, chooses a relationship with a man when she decides to move to Florida to live with Mac.

Criticisms leveled at The Bostonians also apply to The Truth about Lorin Jones. Henry James meant The Bostonians to express misgivings about American society in general; feminism was to be merely an example. Since the ideology of feminism is the forefront of this novel, it is difficult for readers not to see the book as an indictment of women's rights. Similarly, Lurie intended to criticize the separatist leanings of some feminists rather than feminism itself; however, the vitriolic spirit of the anti-male feminists in the novel and Polly's ultimate rejection of her own feminist lifestyle suggest that the book is indeed an indictment of feminism. Both The Bostonians and The Truth about Lorin Jones have additionally been criticized for the vapid characterization of the central protagonist.

Verena and Polly are such malleable persons — shaped and reshaped by the people they meet — that it is difficult to see why strong-willed people would find them fascinating.

One criticism that James escapes and Lurie does not is the credibility of the ending. James ends The Bostonians by acknowledging that marriage to Basil will bring Verena sorrow. Lurie's ending, however, is complacently happy.

Although Polly knows that living with Mac will be not be a perfect life, the emphasis is on the happiness it will bring: He will write a good biography of Lorin Jones; she might return to her own career of painting; and she might even have another child. There is no recognition that Polly, who only months ago abandoned her marriage to live a self-sufficient life in New York, will have any regrets living a marginal life with Mac in Florida.

Related Titles

With The Truth about Lorin Jones, Lurie continues her acerbic exploration of American society, specifically the relationship between men and women as it has been defined since the sexual revolution of the 1960s. In The War Between the Tates (1974) Lurie explores the changing relationship between husband and wife; in Foreign Affairs (1984), she juxtaposes the romantic longings of a middle-aged woman with those of a young man; and in The Truth about Lorin Jones, she describes the trials of a newly divorced woman.

Although these novels emphasize the flawed nature of society and romantic love, each novel ends with re-establishment of the status quo. After rejecting marital commitment, Erica and Brian at the end of The War Between the Tates plan to reconcile, as do Fred and Ruth at the end of Foreign Affairs. Similarly, at the end of The Truth about Lorin Jones, Polly, who had planned to reject heterosexual commitment, decides to live with Mac.

Underscoring the thematic connection among The War Between the Tates, Foreign Affairs, and The Truth about Lorin Jones, the Zimmern family appears in all three novels. In The War Between the Tates, Leonard and Danielle Zimmern are friends of the Tates. In Foreign Affairs, Leonard is the critic who scorns Vinnie's work; his daughter Ruth March is married to Fred. In The Truth about Lorin Jones, Lorin is Leonard's half-sister. During her search to recover Lorin's life, Polly interviews Leonard, Danielle, and Ruth.

In The Truth about Lorin Jones, Lurie continues to explore techniques used in Foreign Affairs. In both novels Lurie uses an alternating sequence for point of view. In Foreign Affairs, the chapters alternate between Vinnie's point of view and Fred's, while in The Truth about Lorin Jones, a section on Polly's life is followed by the voice of one of the people Polly interviews. Both of these works by Lurie are also an imitation of Henry James novels. For Foreign Affairs, Lurie borrowed the international setting that James used in his early novels to explore the clash between American and British society. In The Truth about Lorin Jones, Lurie turns to The Bostonians, a novel James wrote during his middle period, to explore the consequences of imposing change on traditional values.

Concerned with the social milieu of the 1960s, The War Between the Tates is a satire of domestic life. Erica and Brian Tate are at war partly because of sexual freedom and feminism, two important issues in the 1960s. Brian has an affair with a free-spirited graduate student while Erica finds staying at home no longer fulfilling. Lurie skillfully uses the political issues of the 1960s as a backdrop to the story line.

The omniscient narrator compares the Tates' trouble with their adolescent children to the Vietnam War, Brian becomes accidentally involved in a feminist demonstration, and the story ends at a peace rally.

While The War Between the Tates may be somewhat dated because it is so firmly ground in the 1960s, at least two themes remain timeless. The most important theme in the book is that people, even well-educated people, are victims of self-deception. Brian begins his affair with Wendy because he is vaguely dissatisfied with his marriage, disappointed in his career, and worn down by Wendy's pleadings; however, he pretends that the affair will help Wendy to stop idolizing him. Erica seeks a divorce because she is tired of living with Brian and knows he will be miserable married to Wendy, but she pretends she is being noble and selfsacrificing. Wendy, who pretends to herself and others to be weak, manipulates both Erica and Brian into doing what she wants. All of them — Erica, Brian, and Wendy — are antiheroes; they are flawed but not evil people who have few redeeming characteristics.

Another timeless theme, the alienation between children and parents, is savagely portrayed in the novel through the Tates' relationship to their children, Jeffrey and Matilda. The parents are uncomfortably aware that they no longer like their children, who have become ill-mannered, irresponsible, and ugly; the children, on the other hand, seem perfectly complacent about their dislike of the older generation. There is the suggestion that Jeffrey and Matilda are unlikable because their parents ignore them except to discipline them inconsistently. Unfortunately, instead of emphasizing the important issue of raising children and fostering respect between generations, Lurie dismisses this theme at the end of the novel when the children unconvincingly become better behaved.

The War Between the Tates is written in present tense with frequent and long flashbacks. Told in third-person point of view, the book is structured so that usually one chapter is about Erica and the next is about Brian. One of Lurie's most distinctive techniques is the long comparisons she uses throughout the novel. Besides the comparison between raising children and fighting the Vietnam War, there is the comparison Brian makes between his colleagues in the political science department and historical political figures. Later, Brian sees a relationship between his life and specific portraits in the Frick Museum.

Lurie has frequently been compared to Jane Austen. Even her first published novel Love and Friendship (1962) is the title of Austen's juvenilia (written 1790; published 1922). Both authors have written comedies of manners that draw witty portraits of educated, economically comfortable people for whom marriage is an essential issue.

The title character of Emma (1815) by Jane Austen, for example, is also a victim of self-deception although she learns to look more honestly at herself than the Tates do. Moreover, Wendy is much like Harriet, the unsophisticated young woman in Emma who intrudes on the relationship between the two main protagonists until she finds someone of her own kind to live with.

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