

The Two of Them Short Guide

The Two of Them by Joanna Russ

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Characters

Irene, the protagonist, is sixteen years old at the beginning of the novel. She is still in school and playing devious, sometimes harmful psychological games with the lives and reputations of her peers. She is attracted to a variety of people — her girlfriend, boys, teachers and Ernst. She is a street-wise adolescent who "knows what things cost." She is still living at home with her parents — Rose, an aging, romantic, fluffy person who married so she would never have to work again and Casimir, a somewhat cold, finicky accountant. She has no real ambitions or goals. She is drifting.

Ernst Neumann is introduced as Ernst Nooman (is that no-man or new man?) by Rose who tells her daughter that he is an old friend. He becomes the means of escape for Irene. He works for Inter Trans-Temporal and Irene soon convinces him to help her.

He arranges for her training and she eventually joins him as a full-fledged member of the team. They travel all over the galaxy as near-equals. Ernst is symbolic of all those well-intentioned males who try to help and who genuinely care about equality but who always fall short. He can provide the avenue to training and power but he simply cannot understand the importance of the evil of the system which he supports simply because of his gender.

The third major character is Zubeydeh, the twelve-year-old daughter of a drugged woman and the official on the planet. Although she is kept "in her place" by her husband who sedates her, Zubeydeh's mother never questions anything which will destroy her comfortable lifestyle. She loves her daughter but is afraid of Zubeydeh's talent and ambition to become a poet.

Zubeydeh is symbolic of women who are breaking out of a male-dominated existence. These women have talent, drive and ambition. They do not compromise. Even when she is rejected by the women of her own planet, she finds help from a female mentor.

Social Concerns

Russ created a repressed world straight out of the Arabian Nights so that she could examine the world in which she grew up. The mock Moslem planet Al-ed-deen is really America in the 1950s. It is a world which keeps women locked away in harems just like the suburbs of the 1950s which served to lock women away into Donna Reedlike homes with proper, clean-cut American children.

The Two of Them is concerned with the lives of women. How productive or fulfilling are the lives of individual women? What options do they have?

At the beginning of the book, Irene seems to be drifting without any goals.

Her mother also seems to have settled into a simple, comfortable existence.

There seems to be only two options for Irene (and other women). She can either drift through life and eventually become a wife and mother or she can run away and become an enforcer/ agent. Irene choose to break out. When she becomes an agent armed with technological knowledge and training, she unwittingly assumes a male role, and she is seduced into believing that she is an equal member of the Gang. When she travels to another planet, the society at first appears worse than anything she ever experienced at home, but the societies are actually very similar. She eventually realizes that there is no substantial difference between her mother and the women of the harem.

When she wants to change things and make things better for a talented young female, she is forced to violently break out of the system and take the girl with her.

The Two of Them asks some very hard questions. What happens when women find out that they are really powerless or that they have been seduced into believing that they are "equal"? Do they strike out? Do they resort to violence? And what is the role of the poet/writer in society? Will the writer cause the destruction of a civilization that is all too comfortable? Is the writer "mad" or defined as mad/insane by a society which wants to maintain the status quo?

Techniques

The novel opens with a statement "Here they are." The passage goes on to describe two characters. No mention is made of their gender. The story unfolds through a series of "real time" exchanges and flashbacks which reveal not only the current action but the background (and gender) of the two main characters. These flashbacks are essential to the character development.

The protagonist of the novel is Irene Waskiewicz who was living with her mother and father in a small town on Earth when she encountered Ernst, an old friend of her mother's. Although they are from different planets, Ernst's sudden appearance offers her some chance for escape from the humdrum adolescent life she has been living.

When Irene begs him to take her with him, Ernst takes her to another world where she receives training as an agent of the Intergalactic Trans-Temporal Authority. She becomes a member of "the Gang."

Irene adopts a new personality. She becomes Irene Adler, the partner of Ernst, and the two embark on secret missions, become lovers and friends.

They share authority for their missions and alternate roles as leader or listener.

Finally they are sent to Al-ed-deen, a planet excommunicated by the Moslems.

Al-en-deen is based loosely on The Arabian Nights or The Thousand and One Nights. The women are kept in the harem and in the purdah. Irene begins to question the conditions on the planet and the agency that sent her there.

Her awareness of the harmful nature of a chauvinistic society where males dominate and control the lives of all the women causes her to ask why Ernst does not try to change this repressive society.

Irene meets Zubeydeh, the twelveyear-old daughter of a local official with whom they are dealing. Irene identifies strongly with the talented young girl and smuggles her off the planet. This creates even more problems for Irene who soon learns that once you interfere in someone's life, once you give them hope, you become responsible for them. Irene becomes responsible for Zubeydeh and is forced to choose between the agency and Ernst and the young woman. Irene winds up killing Ernst and leaving the Agency when she realizes that her initial avenue of escape was an illusion — it had turned into just another prison. Because Irene is older and more mature, she moves from passive to active participant. When she sees Zubeydeh and recognizes her talent as a poet, Irene decides to help the young girl. Irene casts off Ernst (in the same sense that all adults must cast off their parents and grow beyond their mentors) and becomes the mentor for Zubeydeh. Irene has become an adult by the end of the novel.

Themes

Basically *The Two of Them* deals with twin themes that are central to all of Russ's writing: the role (or roles) of women in a destructive patriarchal society and the role of the artist/writer/poet in a male-dominated society.

Like many of Russ's works, this novel is one of self-disclosure which has a strong feminist message about the empowerment of women.

Key Questions

Prior to the 1970s, female characters in science fiction were often secondary characters who were added for romantic or sexual interest. They had no depth. They were stock characters in a pulp genre written mainly by men. The 1970s saw many new writers exploring "new worlds" of science fiction. Science fiction truly became the "fiction of the possible." Nothing was sacred, novels explored issues of masculinity and femininity, gender roles, sexuality, and the roles of women and female empowerment. Feminist writers like Russ began to create new myths of female heroes.

1. Ernst has many different names for Irene. Sometimes he calls her Maria Sklodowska, sometimes Mikolaj Kopernik, and sometimes Augusta, Lady Lovelace. What do these different names signify? Why do you think that Russ has Ernst call Irene by these different names?

2. When she describes Ernst and Irene, Russ states that "they shared a culture . . . not quite the same world."

What do you think Russ really means when she says that?

3. Describe Irene's mother, Rose.

What would have happened if she had gone to college? Would she be a different type of mother? If Rose were more liberated what would Irene be like?

4. Why do you think that Russ chose to set the bulk of the action on a Moslem planet?

5. Do you think that Russ is guilty of creating stock female characters? Are the women of the planet Al-en-deen believable? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think that Zubeydeh steals Michael?

7. There are many different "twos" in this novel. What do you think the title means?

8. There are many different types of families represented in the book. Describe these families. What is Russ saying about society?

9. Read Suzette Hayden Elgin's short story "For the Sake of Grace" and compare it to this novel. How is it similar and different?

10. Why does Irene kill Ernst? Do you feel that this action is justified?

Why or why not?

11. Irene says that she survived her adolescence by "thinking of herself as Irene Adler — the woman." What does she mean?

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

In *Why Women Can't Write*, Russ states that science fiction is one of the few genres which portrays women as whole people. This may be an overstatement because although much of mainstream science fiction was written by males for other males and it often relegated females to the roles of damsels in distress or sex objects, there were always a few stories which explored new roles for women. On the other hand, the 1970s saw a number of feminist writers exploring the genre of science fiction; they often explored the role of liberated reader and writer.

Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17* (1966) presented a protagonist who was a poet and yet was capable of helping with technological solutions to problems. Walter Miller portrays a world which men have destroyed in his *Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) but a world in which three women are remarkably resilient. Kate Wilhelm in "The Funeral" (1978) creates a young protagonist who becomes a writer in order to cope with her life and a male society.

Russ's "The Second Inquisition" (1975) has a sixteen-year-old protagonist who is seeking refuge from the repressive society of 1925 America. The girl sees a visitor reading and is enticed into reading the "forbidden book" which transports her to a more liberated world.

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