

Vida Short Guide

Vida by Marge Piercy

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Contents

Vida Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

The name Davida Asch recalls both the Biblical battle between David and Goliath and the ash out of which the mythical Phoenix arises, taking flight. Vida Asch's character is compelling and well-drawn. Although defined largely by her politics, Vida "develops" when she becomes sexually involved with Joel, a draft deserter several years her junior. Joel is the second most well-drawn character in this novel; many others appear, although none are as fully fleshed, and most are dimensionless when compared to the unconventional, beautiful, capable Vida.

Judith Walzer says: "Vida is an adventuress, rushing acceptance of her own needs, a present-day Moll Flanders who fervently believes her goals are valid because they are hers. Piercy . . .

is capable of a shrewdness about her protagonist that escapes her in the rest of the novel . . . Vida's energetic uncertainty, when contrasted with the flat, unprofitable political cliches of the rest of the book, seem that much more appealing."

Many critics cite Vida's nuanced character as a strength of this novel.

Some contend "the vitality of the novel depends almost entirely on Vida herself." We share "her exhaustion and confusion, her yearning for rest and legality" and her stubborn refusal to give in, to be taken prisoner. While she is clearly courageous, it may be Vida's faults — including her self-righteousness — that most entice reader empathy.

Joel has the sense of humor Vida lacks. She, in turn, teaches him history.

Together, they take "the most important political action either has in years" as they bomb the construction site for a nuclear power plant. This shows Vida moving from the past into the present; unfortunately, Joel's passion proves his undoing, and the novel ends with his arrest.



Social Concerns/Themes

Vida, Piercy's sixth novel, is named for its protagonist, Davida Asch, a radical anti-Vietnam war fugitive eluding capture for her participation in a bombing ten years earlier. Vida's activism recalls Piercy's involvement with SDS; her "group," the Network, pointedly resembles the Weathermen. Vida was one of four people coerced by Randy (an undercover federal agent) into bombing a Mobil Oil office. Thereafter, Vida leads the life of a fugitive; she frets over cameras in drugstores, can never use her name; calls from pay phone to pay phone; disguises herself to visit her dying mother in the hospital. When her mother does die, Vida cannot attend the funeral, although the FBI does.

In the Autumn of 1979, Vida returns from the West Coast to the East, where she learns that her husband, supportive for many years, is divorcing her. She faces her mother's final illness, her sister's imprisonment, and the capture of an old colleague and lover. This desperate isolation is offset by the hope a new lover, Joel, offers; at the novel's close, however, Joel is captured by the FBI, and Vida — not certain she can continue — nonetheless does, disappearing into the night.

Piercy traces Vida's evolution from liberal to activist to radical revolutionary in meticulous detail. Moving between present and past, she "chronicles the weakening of a powerful anti-establishment organization brought about partially by internal disputes, and partially because they resort to violence, a phenomenon the author implies was usually instigated by gov't agents." Moreover, Piercy records, through Vida, the "dissolution of an era of social consciousness into one of apathy and self-interest." Vida's personal and political identities are inseparable, but her attempts to be active while underground are ineffectual. She is completely alienated socially from all but a few allies, and those ties are tenuous, based on a past they can neither undo nor re-create.

Techniques

Piercy assumes much reader familiarity with the issues explored in *Vida*.

Hence, exposition and explanation of character motivation are not provided.

Of this novel, Vivian Gornick says: "There is neither sufficient substance to the original political history nor to the subsequent spiritual legacy." Elinor Langer defends Piercy's choice in this regard, however, calling it "a deliberate decision, a product of the subordination of the novelist's detachment to the radical's allegiance. If the underground metaphor means the necessities of survival dominate the possibility of reappraisal, she will accept the limitation rather than alter the point of view." Some readers have held they cannot empathize with Piercy's characters because she does not convince them the destructive behavior of those characters is justified. Others find much that is praiseworthy in *Vida*.

Langer contends the novel is a technical tour de force, a "fully controlled, tightly structured dramatic narrative of such artful intensity that it leads the reader on at almost every page.

Throughout this novel, the author employs prolonged flashbacks effectively, and sustains a suspenseful pitch for her readers. Her rich, "thick" description has been applauded, and decried. Some reviewers find it leaves "too little" to the reader's imagination, others find the "microscopic fidelity" riveting.

Key Questions

Student activism reached a zenith in the 1960s in America, with groups such as SDS and the Weathermen protesting the Vietnam War, the Black Panthers battling racism and NOW rallying for women's rights. Discussion of the decade — its crises, debates, literature, journalism — will provide a richer (and welcomed) context for discussion of *Vida*, the text. The historical milieu out of which *Vida* takes shape is wellcaptured in James Kunen's nonfiction record entitled *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary* (Avon, 1972).

1. What is "radical" about *Vida's* activism? Why is she a fugitive? Did she ever want to be?
2. With this novel, how does Piercy evoke "the fierce and fatal isolation of the fugitive?"
3. Even in her most exhausted, desperate moments, what keeps *Vida* from turning herself in?
4. Piercy's prose, in *Vida*, has often been characterized as "thick." Do you find this depth of detail an asset, or a liability? How so?
5. What is the psychological outcome of *Vida's* (thwarted) love affair with Joel?
6. Does Piercy have a polemical purpose apparent in *Vida*? If yes, what is it?
7. For whom, in *Vida*, does the author reserve her most scathing indictments, her sharpest rhetorical barbs?

Literary Precedents

Homer's *Odyssey* (c.1050-850 B.C.)

provides the prototype for Piercy's protagonist: a wandering warrior coping with peril, adventure, and misadventure as he or she struggles to return home. The twist in *Vida* is, of course, that *Vida* must remain homeless. Too, her antiwar activism renders her a "civil disobedient" rather than a warrior in the classic sense.

Related Titles

Many of Piercy's novels explore American society's oppression of the individual. In *The High Cost of Living* (1978), three characters, like Vida, are ostracized; each yearns for acceptance, an end to a lifetime of alienation. Fugitives appear again in Piercy's most recent *The Longings of Women* (1994), while *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) juxtaposes the flawed present (of Vida's world) against the Utopian future she imagines.

The Vietnam War and its alteration of dissident's lives is thematic in Vida.

Similarly, *Gone to Soldiers* (1987) focusses on the ways in which World War II altered women's lives. A 1986 major motion picture, *Running On Empty*, parallels the story told in Vida quite closely.

Piercy addresses critical response to Vida in a 1982 essay, *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt*, published by the University of Michigan Press.



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