

The Washington Square Ensemble Short Guide

The Washington Square Ensemble by Madison Smartt Bell

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Contents

The Washington Square Ensemble Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	7
Techniques.....	8
Themes.....	9
Key Questions.....	10
Literary Precedents.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Characters

In Madison Smartt Bell's novels, character development is generally stronger than plot development. The Washington Square Ensemble is certainly no exception, as multiple, widely divergent voices are blended into a single narrative of the formation and dissolution of this group of small-time "Pharmaceuticals salesmen" (i.e., drug dealers). Like a musical ensemble, their story consists of four major motifs developed through a series of movements in two major parts. The novel also resembles a theatrical ensemble in which the focus is upon the group rather than the individual actors — the five major characters and two minor ones who constitute the cast. Existing on the fringes of organized crime, this group operates on the principle that a small operation allows the participants anonymity and reduces the chance that either major criminals or the police will consider them worth harassing.

The manager of this drug-selling operation is a charismatic 'white Italian' known on the street as Johnny B. Goode, but known to the police as Gianni Dellacroce. The narrator of only two chapters in the first section ("The Storytelling Stone"), he becomes the focal point in the second section ("The Garden of Souls"), where he is the narrator of four chapters and the conarrator of the final chapter. Appropriately enough, his narratives begin and end "The Storytelling Stone," as he explains the organization of his business. The underlying principle is individual anonymity: He has given each of his salesmen a name, and they know each other by those names. Only his lifelong friend, Holy Mother, knows Johnny's actual name; in the opening chapter, when he describes his operation, Johnny plays upon the Italian stereotype, remarking that his name is "Enrico Spaghetti or something like that." His seemingly uncanny ability to "name" the other members of the group gives him power over them; each of the other major characters accepts his individual name as the most fitting choice. Although his "salesmen" are impressed by his apparent knowledge of their inner thoughts and feelings, Johnny reveals that this knack is actually a combination of careful observation, some limited research, and basic "street smarts."

Clearly Johnny has mastered the skills necessary to survive on the streets of New York City. He has chosen to keep his operation too small to incite jealousy in his peers or suspicion among the higher ranking members of organized crime and — he thinks — too small to attract police attention. A smooth talker, he has been able to negotiate a limited independence for himself and his operation. As Holy Mother's accounts of their early days reveal, Johnny lacks the nerve to be a hit man; thus, although he readily accepts "contracts," he drives the getaway car and Holy Mother is the actual shooter. Once Holy Mother is imprisoned, Johnny cannot continue in the business of murder-for-hire; so he chooses to set up an operation that allows greater anonymity, and he takes elaborate precautions to make sure that the drugs can never be traced to him.

Likewise, even though he goes to some effort to ensure that Holy Mother will receive proper burial, he enters the dead man's apartment primarily to remove any trace of a connection to himself or his operation. This ability to distance himself emotionally from



his actions and their consequences is the reason Porco Miserio describes him as the most immoral member of the group.

Johnny's closest associate is his lifelong friend, Aniello Di Angelo, known on the street as "Crow" because of his physical appearance. When he and Johnny were just young boys, Johnny dubbed him "Holy Mother" because of his religious devotion; he has come to accept this once-hated nickname, and the ensemble use it exclusively. Indicted for fifteen of the thirty-five or more murders he committed, he was convicted of three and imprisoned at Attica. There Holy Mother not only witnessed but inadvertently became involved in the Attica riot, during which he was severely injured. In the hospital he was given morphine to ease his great physical pain, but the narcotic also unleashed nightmares in which he re-lived the most brutal and gruesome murders he had committed; only larger doses of painkillers could block out both kinds of pain, but they led to heroin addiction and eventually — when he could no longer endure the situation — to his death.

Santa Barbara, whose actual name is never given, is a Puerto Rican immigrant who commutes from Hoboken, New Jersey, to sell drugs in Washington Square. According to Yusuf Ali, Santa (as the ensemble call him) was known as Paco until Johnny identified Santa Barbara as his patron saint and gave him that name. The son of a devout Roman Catholic mother who came to the United States to get away from voodoo, Santa has become a voodoo holy man, merging Catholic theology with belief in Olofi, the creator of everything, including God and Jesus Christ. Santa instinctively recognizes the danger Porco Miserio poses to the ensemble, and he begs Johnny's permission to place a fatal curse on the old drunkard, but Johnny will not agree. When Porco Miserio tells his story of the dead Comanche and the storytelling stone, only Santa comprehends the significance of the dead man and his stone. Santa knows that the Comanche was a holy man and the storytelling stone is an otan or sacred object inhabited by a god. Convinced that the stone operates on its own volition and seeks out the person who holds it, Santa tries to understand why it has been given to Porco and shown to the ensemble, but he can determine only that the stone is instructing him to give the Comanche a proper voodoo funeral.

Yusuf Ali too considers the stone sacred, although he believes it is the Black Stone of the Kaaba; thus, he is willing to help Santa Barbara perform the funeral ritual for the dead Comanche. Formerly known as Leon Lenox, Ali is an integral part of Johnny's plan for the group; he provides the muscle to intimidate the ensemble's customers and potential rivals. A black Muslim with the height of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the build of a world-class weight lifter, Yusuf Ali has grown up on the streets. When his mother was killed by a gunshot through their apartment door and her live-in lover was shot for cheating in a poker game, young Leon lived alone in the basement of a rat-infested building, hiding from all humans and associating only with the rats. Initially he kept these rats at bay by killing the little rats and feeding them to the larger rats, but eventually he ate the larger rats and made a jacket of their skins. Known as Professor Rat (because he also loved books), he was recruited as a runner for a heroin dealer named Buzz, who assured him he would not be prosecuted because he was a juvenile. Nevertheless, Leon was arrested and sent to a juvenile center. Shortly after his release, he again



encountered Buzz, now a black Muslim named Ali abd AlGhaffir. Again Ali abd Al-Ghaffir recruited Leon, giving him a copy of the Quran. Leon's spiritual growth now began to catch up with his physical growth, and he followed the pattern of Malcolm X, becoming first a militant and later an advocate of peace. He is now learning to read Arabic in order to read the Koran in the original language. He had completely abandoned his former identity, but had not yet assumed a Muslim name when Johnny recruited him and gave him the name Yusuf Ali. As a Muslim, Yusuf does not use drugs, and he refuses to sell drugs to his own people, but he has few qualms about the business generally, and he is fiercely loyal to Johnny, willing even to be arrested to protect him.

The ensemble's apparent antagonist is the elderly white drunk and speed freak to whom Johnny has given the name Porco Miserio, literally the misery of the pig, the lowest of the low.

Interestingly enough, Porco agrees with Johnny's assessment. A horn player who has no permanent residence, he lives primarily by his wits: In one section he tries to cheat a bartender out of eight cents when he asks to exchange a handful of coins for a fivedollar bill, and when that stratagem fails, he lifts the wallet of another bar patron. He manipulates his friends, who allow him to store his instruments in their apartments. Most of the ensemble consider him trouble and would like to eliminate him, but for some reason Johnny likes him and protects him, even though Porco has caused problems in the past and, he suspects, may do so again.

Bell uses Porco as a device to establish his narrative structure. As the novel opens, Porco has the storytelling stone. According to the Comanche from whom he received it, the stone determines who holds it; thus, although the Comanche would like to keep it, he must give it to Porco. When the Comanche takes Porco's tequila and kills himself by drinking the entire bottle in one gulp, the power of the stone seems further confirmed. For some unexplained reason, Porco feels compelled to show the stone to Johnny and the ensemble. Almost immediately Johnny insults and fires one of his salesmen — Carlo, a quadron interested only in his clothes and his looks. The dissolution of the group is underway.

Once the group has seen the stone in Porco's possession, each of them begins to tell his own story and the story of his relationship with Johnny. Following each narrative, Porco is given a section in which his mundane current experiences provide a degree of balance to the extraordinary tales of Holy Mother, Santa Barbara, and Yusuf Ali. Thus, Bell uses Porco to maintain the novel's believability and, simultaneously, to develop the plot line. While the ensemble move about the city on their own errands and recount their individual thoughts, their paths intersect with that of Porco, and the influence of the storytelling stone seems to draw each of them toward the others and toward the climactic confrontation scene in Washington Square Park. Moreover, Porco provides the link between Whelan and the group as, perhaps impelled by the storytelling stone, he discloses the information that sends Whelan to stake out the park. Significantly, when Porco and Johnny flee the park, Porco loses the storytelling stone.



The legal establishment is represented only by the ex-policeman Tommy Whelan and his friend Sal Brasi, who is still on the force. A former narc, Whelan has been obsessed with catching drug dealers since the day he realized his son Stevie had become an addict. Whelan is hated by his son, especially when Stevie joins a cult and learns to blame his father for all the problems in their relationship.

The resulting bitterness has caused Whelan to develop ulcers serious enough that he has been forced to retire from the police force and work as a security guard. Now that he has plenty of time, no operation is small enough to avoid his scrutiny, and he pumps Porco for information about Johnny and the ensemble. When Porco drops some hints about the operation, Whelan persuades his reluctant friend Sal to meet him in Washington Square Park for a chess game which is actually a cover for surveillance. Neither of these men fits the image of the noble and dedicated lawman; Whelan's attitude is obsessive, and Sal's is too lackadaisical. Nevertheless, Whelan does succeed in breaking up the Washington Square ensemble, holding Yusuf Ali and Santa Barbara in custody for several hours and forcing Johnny to flee the city.

Social Concerns

Bell's preoccupation seems to be with creating memorable characters, not with addressing social issues. In *The Washington Square Ensemble*, as in his later novels, urban social problems such as organized crime and the drug traffic provide a backdrop against which the characters can be seen. For example, Johnny and his group are drug dealers, but they are portrayed no less sympathetically than the policemen. Bell describes their attitudes and their methods of evading both the law and rival groups, but his tone is matter of fact, not judgmental.

Bell likewise adopts a pose of detachment in his portrayal of urban poverty and crime. Thus, Holy Mother's accounts of his gruesome "hits" take on the surreal quality of nightmares as he describes them. Similarly, Yusuf Ali's grotesque narrative of his life among the rats and Holy Mother's account of his treatment after the Attica riots would be unbearable if the novelist allowed his readers to develop a significant degree of empathy for these characters. To some extent, the characters' alienation from society is reflected in the way Bell distances himself and his audience from them.



Techniques

Bell constructs his novel like a jazz piece consisting of two major movements: "The Storytelling Stone" introduces the individual characters and, through them, the major motifs of the novel; then "The Garden of Souls" ties together all the separate motifs and builds to the conclusion — i.e., the final dissolution of the ensemble.

Within each of the major sections the narrative is presented through a series of separate voices, each of which contributes one of the novel's motifs. In "The Storytelling Stone" Johnny B. Goode opens the narrative with the account of what appears to be a typical evening. He explains his business philosophy and procedures, but his account is interrupted by the arrival of Porco Miserio, who feels compelled to show him the stone and describe its powers. At this point Johnny fades into the background as — presumably impelled by the stone — Holy Mother, Yusuf Ali, and Santa Barbara begin to reflect upon their life stories. Each narrative is presented as a stream of consciousness in which memories and current actions are thematically linked.

Before the first section ends, each of these three narrators has completed his quest. Holy Mother has finally found the way to end his nightmares; Yusuf Ali has discovered how Porco defeated him; and Santa Barbara has performed the appropriate rituals for the dead Comanche. Johnny returns to narrate the final section in which he complacently reflects upon his lifestyle; in contrast to Holy Mother's inescapable nightmares, his musings are pleasant dreams, but as dreams they are necessarily illusory.

Bell begins "The Garden of Souls" with Whelan and Brasi, the force that will eventually destroy the ensemble.

In this section, Bell varies his earlier pattern of presenting one of Porco's sections after each section narrated by another character. Nevertheless, Porco's presence continues to be felt, especially in the second section, as his phone call arouses Johnny's anxiety and leads him to visit Holy Mother's apartment, where he finds his friend's body. Holy Mother's death removes Johnny's only personal tie to the group and makes it possible for him to flee as Whelan closes in.

Themes

In *The Washington Square Ensemble*, his first novel, Bell creates an atmosphere of fate. The storytelling stone functions as an instrument to reveal the inner strengths and weaknesses of the characters and to direct the course of the action. When the Comanche insists that Porco has been chosen by the stone, this insignificant, washed-up horn player sets in motion a series of apparent coincidences that eventually break up the ensemble. After each section narrated by another character, Bell inserts a section devoted to Porco's thoughts and activities; and Porco's frequent references to the stone serve to emphasize its power. Moreover, the stone gains the respect of both Santa Barbara and Yusuf Ali, the two characters who retain strong spiritual values.

If the storytelling stone represents a supernatural force intent upon breaking up the ensemble, then the opposing force is the charisma of Johnny B. Goode. A careful planner and skillful manipulator of human beings, Johnny knows precisely what members his group needs and how to gain psychological control of each one. Although Porco calls Johnny the most evil member of the group, his opinions cannot be equated with those of the author. In fact, Bell carefully avoids couching this conflict in theological terms; instead he explores the consciousness of each character in turn, demonstrating how the strengths and weaknesses of that individual draw him in Johnny's orbit.

Finally, by making Johnny's the dominant voice in the final section, Bell allows the other characters to comment (explicitly and implicitly) upon his character, while the author refuses to pass final judgment upon Johnny.

Like the characters in other Bell novels, Johnny and his cohorts are social misfits who have rejected conventional social values as hypocritical and meaningless. Each of these men has developed a personal code in which loyalty and a sense of obligation toward "his own people" are the paramount virtues. Thus, even though various individuals are sometimes at odds, the operation can succeed because of each man's loyalty to Johnny and, by extension, to the group. Carlo, who lacks this sense of loyalty, is quickly dismissed from the ensemble.

Similarly, because he feels responsible for Holy Mother's fate, Johnny violates his rule of noninvolvement, first to get his friend released from prison, and later to assure him a proper Catholic funeral. Santa Barbara's devotion to voodoo requires that he risk arrest to give the dead Comanche the type of funeral rites due a holy man. Yusuf Ali's acceptance of the Muslim faith means that he must refuse to sell drugs to his fellow African-Americans. Even Whelan and Brasi, who represent law enforcement, adhere to a code in which friendship is more important than the legal code or police procedure.



Key Questions

Thomas Ruffen says of this novel, "The story itself is no more than a few violent incidents in a long lifetime of violence, but the digressions, narrated in sociopathic streams of consciousness, provide fascinating glimpses into the fabric of lawlessness and urban decay." These comments echo the most frequent assessment of the virtues and faults of Madison Smartt Bell, namely that his plot structure is weak but individual passages are brilliant. Discussion groups might examine the structure of *The Washington Square Ensemble*, considering whether the underlying plot structure has frequently been misunderstood or even overlooked. Another area for discussion is the structure and function of each individual narrative.

More than the later novels, *The Washington Square Ensemble* develops the theme of inevitability or fate. Discussion groups might analyze the role of the storytelling stone in establishing this theme. Consideration might also be given to the relative influence of inevitability and chance in determining the fate of the ensemble, as well as the course of each character's life.

As in his later novels, Bell portrays a variety of character types, all of whom share a cynical distrust of the social establishment. Disillusioned by their previous experiences, these individuals establish personal codes to replace the traditional values which have failed them. Thus, the narratives of the major character provide a basis for scrutiny, not only of the complexity of Bell's characters, but also of his apparent attitude concerning the plight of humankind in the modern world.

1. This novel is divided into two major parts. The first of these is "The Storytelling Stone." What is the stone's significance as a plot device? How is the title of this section appropriate?
2. The second section, "The Garden of Souls," takes its title from Johnny's favorite jazz recording. Ken Kalfus says, "The book has the feel of a modern jazz composition: the 'ensemble' jams to one theme, but each player gets a solo." How do these comments help to explain the significance of Johnny's preference for jazz? Why is the title of this section also appropriate?
3. Ruffen has also praised Bell's "remarkable ear for the street vernacular of many divergent voices," a skill which enables him, Kalfus says, to create "five distinct and consistent voices." Is each character's voice consistent and distinct? Is the "street vernacular" of each character appropriate and believable?
4. Even though Johnny believes his operation is too small to attract anyone's attention, it does not escape Whelan's scrutiny. Why does Whelan harbor a deeply personal resentment toward Johnny? Is his encounter with Porco strictly a matter of chance?
5. In what ways does Whelan conform to the stereotype of the burnedout urban cop? In what ways is he different?



6. Despite their obvious differences in age and temperament, Johnny and Porco seem drawn to each other, so much so that one reviewer refer to Porco as Johnny's "alter ego." What is the link between them? Why does Johnny protect Porco from the ensemble?
7. Johnny possesses a talent for giving people nicknames and making those nicknames stick. Consider the names he gives himself and his associates. Are these names really appropriate?
8. Johnny no longer thinks of himself as a part of organized crime. Even though the crime families supply his drugs, he considers his operation simply another small business. Show how his behavior both confirms and belies this assessment.
9. Porco says Johnny is the most immoral member of the group, worse even than Holy Mother, who has killed at least thirty-five people. Is Porco's evaluation accurate? Explain.
10. Holy Mother gives a detailed account of the Attica riot. Why does Bell include this section? Is the narrative directly relevant to an understanding of Holy Mother's personality? Does it have a larger role in the novel as a whole?
11. Describe the process by which the religiously devout Holy Mother became Crow, the hit man. Does his experience reflect that of any other characters? How does this story help to develop the novel's larger theme(s)?
12. Even though his and Johnny's association with organized crime seems relegated to the past, Holy Mother's narratives include stories about Gallo and Columbo. Why does Bell include these stories? Why does he use the names of actual crime figures?
13. Holy Mother injects heroin into several parts of his body, ending with his jugular vein. Why does he choose each of these sites? Why does he finally choose the jugular vein?
14. Santa Barbara, Holy Mother, and Yusuf Ali represent diverse ethnic groups, but how different are their actual backgrounds? Is each typical of his ethnic group or merely stereotypical? What do their ethnic diversity and differing temperaments add to the development of the novel's theme and plot? What is the specific function of each as a character?
15. Why does Bell include Yusuf Ali's account of living with the rats? Is the purpose merely to shock the reader, or is some type of symbolism intended?
16. What is the role of Porco Miserio in the overall structure of the novel?
Why is he given more passages than any other character? Why are most of his sections relatively short?



17. Santa Barbara describes his introduction to voodoo. How has his association with Mr. Rivera affected his Roman Catholic beliefs? Why does Bell choose to make him a voodoo priest when, ironically, his mother brought him to the United States to escape voodoo?

18. Describe the funeral ritual for the dead Comanche. Why does Yusuf Ali agree to help? How does Porco become involved?

19. Why does Johnny attack the Rastas (Rastafarians)? Isn't such behavior a violation of his business practices? To what forces can the change be attributed?

20. When Johnny flees Washington Square Park and New York City, why does he agree to take Porco with him?

Why does Porco agree to go?

Literary Precedents

In terms of theme and prose style, Bell acknowledges the direct influence of Walker Percy, whose novels also portray vividly drawn modern individuals adrift in an essentially absurd world. Like Percy, Bell presents a "slice of life" which captures a brief period in the lives of his characters without presenting their entire histories or conclusively establishing their futures.

Bell's emphasis upon the grotesque elements of modern society also seems to reflect the influence of Flannery O'Connor, although his characters rarely display the self-awareness achieved by hers; in fact, Bell's characters frequently seem to resemble the bizarre characters found in the fiction of Erskine Caldwell, although Caldwell's comic tone is largely absent.

Certainly the use of multiple narrators can be traced back to the example of William Faulkner, as can the poetic quality of Bell's prose. Again, however, Bell does not directly imitate his predecessor — creating his lyrical prose, not with high rhetoric, but from the diction and rhythms of ordinary speech.

Related Titles

In *The Washington Square Ensemble*, as in most of Bell's novels, the major characters find themselves at odds with a social establishment which has somehow failed them. Lacking confidence in conventional values, often they band together in some kind of alternative society which usually is transitory at best. Frequently the plot line involves the establishment and the breakdown of these social orders. Further, *The Washington Square Ensemble* and *Waiting for the End of the World* (1985) are set primarily in New York City, and Bell's only mystery/adventure novel, *Straight Cut* (1986), begins there. In each of these novels, the drug traffic is a significant plot element. Although New York City is also the setting for the first section of *Save Me, Joe Louis*, and some of the characters from *The Washington Square Ensemble* are mentioned in passing, the action quickly moves south and drugs are not important to the plot.



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