What I Saw from Where I Stood Study Guide

What I Saw from Where I Stood by Marisa Silver

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

When Marisa Silver's short story collection *Babe in Paradise* appeared in print in 2001, it received enthusiastic reviews, many of which singled out "What I Saw from Where I Stood" as one of its best stories. The story chronicles one week in the lives of young couple, Charles and Dulcie, who a year earlier had miscarried after six months of pregnancy. Charles, the "I" of the title, tells their story from his perspective, from "where [he] stood," as he struggles to help his wife deal with the baby's death and to gain enough strength to face the future. Through his narrative that subtly details his observations and responses to his wife's pain, Silver presents a poignant study of the healing influence of compassion and support, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Author Biography

Marisa Silver was born on April 23, 1960, in Shaker Heights, New Jersey, to Raphael Silver, a film director and producer, and Joan Micklin Silver, a director. While taking classes in the early 1990s at Harvard University, Silver began writing short stories, but her interest in film turned her attention to directing and editing documentaries, including with Peter Davis, the Emmy-nominated “A Community of Praise,” a segment of the *Middletown* series for PBS, which profiled Christian fundamentalists. In 1992, she directed an episode of *L. A. Law* and *Indecency*, a film for television. She gained fame, however, at age twenty-four for her work in film, beginning with *Old Enough*, which she wrote and co-produced with her sister Dina in 1984. The film won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival that year. Her directorial success continued with *Permanent Record* in 1988, *Vital Signs* in 1990, and *He Said, She Said* in 1991, with Ken Kwapis who later became her husband.

Silver turned to fiction writing toward the end of the decade when she decided that she did not have enough creative control over her work in films. During this period, she attended creative writing workshops, and in 2001, she had a collection of short stories, *Babe in Paradise* published. In 2005, her novel *No Direction Home* appeared. Both works received positive reviews. Silver has also contributed articles to various periodicals, including the *New Yorker*, *American Film*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Interview*, *People*, and *Working Woman*. As of 2005, she lived with her husband and two sons in Los Angeles.

Plot Summary

Charles, a young telephone repairman who narrates the story, explains at the beginning of “What I Saw from Where I Stood” that his wife Dulcie, a second-grade teacher, is afraid of the Los Angeles freeways. He remembers that she had to drive home from a party that they went to the previous week after he got drunk. Her touch as she took the keys from his pocket excited him, especially since he admits that she has not been touching him very much lately. Dulcie sank lower in the driver’s seat when they passed the hospital where she had miscarried their baby a year earlier after being pregnant for six months.

During the drive home, they were rear-ended. As he and Dulcie got out of the car to inspect the damage, which was minor to such an old car, four or five men emerged from the van that hit them and started posturing. One then pulled a gun. After Dulcie screamed, “Don’t shoot,” another demanded her keys, which she immediately threw on the ground. Charles calmly picked up the keys and handed them to one of the men along with money from his wallet. When the man with the gun did not move, Charles panicked, grabbed Dulcie’s hand, and ran down a side street. They made it to the police station where Dulcie expressed her fears about the men getting their keys and address, but the police gave them “their heartfelt assurance” that there was nothing the police could do for them. They tried to convince Dulcie that carjackers showing up at the homes of their victims “almost never happened,” but she was not reassured and so spent a sleepless night going over the details of the crime.

She grew more agitated as she tried and failed to find any logical explanation for what happened. Charles notes that she did the same thing when they lost their baby a year before, as she struggled to find some reason for it or someone to blame even though she had been told that what had happened was no one’s fault. As they laid there in bed, Charles told her not to think about what could have happened during the carjacking, but Dulcie insisted, “How can you not think about it?”

When Charles came home from work the next day, he noticed that Dulcie had obviously been crying for a long time. She also had moved the mattress from their bedroom to the middle of the living room to get away from the rat that had nested in the bedroom wall and had been waking them up for the past month with its scratching. When the janitor refused to do anything about it, Charles had patched every hole in the apartment so that the rat would not be able to get in, which reassured Dulcie. After the carjacking, though, her fears returned, and she became convinced that the rat would find a way into the apartment. She also insisted that Charles put his voice on the answering machine so that callers know that there is a man living there.

That night, they slept with the lights on so that, Dulcie insisted, people knew they were home and would not break in. She then, however, considered the possibility that anyone would assume they were out of town if the lights were on at four in the morning. When she wondered whether she should get an inflatable man to put in the seat beside her while driving alone and insisted that there was a good chance that any man driving next

to her would have a gun, Charles tried to calm her. He explains how difficult it was for Dulcie when her milk came in two days after their baby died. She had exclaimed, “What a waste.”

The next evening, Charles was startled by someone throwing an egg at his car until he realized that it was Halloween. He notes that normally Dulcie enjoys decorating for the holiday and greeting children at the door, but this night he found no decorations and a dark apartment. Dulcie refused to open the door to anyone, afraid that teenagers would be out, “looking for trouble.”

When the doorbell rang, Charles waved away Dulcie’s protests and opened the door to a boy wearing a cowboy outfit. Charles tried to give him some cookies, but the boy would not take them, insisting that he was only allowed to take things that are wrapped. After he heard other children trick-or-treating on the floor below, Charles insisted to Dulcie that they could not live like this any longer, but she replied, “I can.”

Three days after the carjacking, Dulcie returned to work. Charles explains how much she loves teaching. Later that day, however, she showed him a new rule at the school that forbids teachers to touch their students and declared, “this is a f——up town.” The two then tried to make jokes about the city.

The following Saturday, Dulcie called the exterminator after she read that rats could carry airborne viruses. When the exterminator arrived, he told them that rats come inside houses to get warm and to have babies, which visibly upset Dulcie.

Charles explains that a month after the baby died, they received the ashes in the mail. When Dulcie realized what they were, she began to giggle uncontrollably. They decided to scatter the ashes in the ocean. After Charles waded out into the water and dumped the contents of the small bag into the ocean, Dulcie told him, “I think that’s the bravest thing I’ve ever seen a person do.”

One week after the carjacking, the police told them that their car was found, and it was being held in South Central Los Angeles, a dangerous part of town. The officer warned Charles to go there early in the morning. When they got to the car, they discovered that it had been stripped of everything, including the steering wheel, and so they had to leave it at the pound. Dulcie begged Charles not to make her go with him to the police lineup to pick out the men who robbed them.

Charles dropped Dulcie off at school and walked for hours on a path up into the mountains, thinking about whether he should leave her. He admits that he had been looking forward to the baby and remembers how he felt during its birth, acknowledging that he felt like he would die if anything happened to Dulcie. When he got home, he took the mattress back into the bedroom. Dulcie did not say anything to him about it when she returned, realizing that he had made up his mind to get things back to normal. When he turned to her in bed, she did not move away as he expected she would. As they began to make love, Dulcie got nervous and mentioned getting her diaphragm, but

Charles insisted that it would be okay without it. The two were very frightened at the prospect of facing another pregnancy, but they did not stop.

Characters

Charles

Charles is a young repairman for the telephone company who, although he likes to get drunk at parties, proves himself to be very responsible, supportive, and caring with his wife Dulcie. He presents the details of their lives in a matter of fact manner, yet these qualities emerge in bits of dialogue and through often subtle gestures. During the carjacking, he acts with a cool head, calmly handing over money to one of the men. But when one of the carjackers starts to wave a gun in his face, he acts quickly, grabbing Dulcie's hand and running away from them. He takes seriously the warning about venturing into South Central Los Angeles only in the morning when he has to pick up their car.

Charles does everything that he can to ease Dulcie's fears after the carjacking, agreeing to sleep in the living room with all of the lights on. He notices the pain she experiences whenever she is reminded of the death of their child as when she shrinks down in the driver's seat when they pass the hospital. After they receive the baby's ashes in the mail, Charles tenderly describes the package, "nestled inside [a Styrofoam] hole, like a tiny bird." He then takes the remains, wades out into the ocean, and scatters them into the water, an act that Dulcie insists is "the bravest thing [she had] ever seen a person do."

His patience has its limits though. Realizing that Dulcie's fears have caused them to live "like some rat trapped in [their] own wall," he begins to gently force Dulcie to accept the messiness of everyday life and to have enough courage to regain a measure of hope for the future.

Dulcie

Dulcie is a second-grade teacher in a Los Angeles public school and is married to Charles. Since their baby died a year ago, she has withdrawn from the world and from Charles, refusing to allow herself to be vulnerable to another disaster. The carjacking only increases her withdrawal as she begins to fear everyone around her: men in cars who might point guns at her, teenagers at Halloween who may be looking for trouble, and Charles when he wants to become intimate with her, which could result in another disastrous pregnancy.

Dulcie, however, still has the capacity for trust, especially in Charles who determines that she cannot continue being so fearful of the world. When he pulls the mattress back into the bedroom, "she climb[s] into bed like a soldier following orders." While she is still afraid of the dark and of the consequences of another pregnancy, she eventually lets Charles lead her back into the world of the living.

Themes

Lack of Control

Dulcie becomes afraid of things that she cannot control. She is afraid of freeways because she cannot always get off of them when she wants. She is afraid of having another baby because she cannot make sure that it will live. In an effort to regain a sense of order and control, she tries to find logical explanations for the terrible things that have happened to her. Charles notes: “Dulcie needs things to be exact. You have to explain yourself clearly when you’re around her.” When their baby died, she kept trying to find a reason, thinking that it must have been her fault. She needed someone to take the blame, and if it turned out to be her, she could accept that because at least she would have an answer, something that she could fix in order to prevent the same thing from happening again.

When their car is stolen, Dulcie stays up all night going over what happened, wondering why their car was picked and why the men had not shot them. She finally concludes that nothing about the incident makes sense. Since she cannot find a logical explanation for the carjacking and for their getting away unhurt, she feels that she does not have any control over her own safety and so tries to do everything she can to make herself more safe. She leaves the lights on so burglars will think they are at home, and she wants to buy an inflatable man to put in the passenger seat so other motorists will think she is with a man and then will not attack her. Charles goes along with her desperate need for control until he realizes that she will never be able to attain it. In an effort to break them out of the cage she has put them in, he gently persuades her to take a chance on the future without knowing what may happen. By the end of the story, Dulcie begins to accept the fact that she cannot control all of the aspects of her life and that knowledge causes her to reconnect with Charles and to take a chance on getting pregnant again.

Disillusionment

Dulcie and Charles are repeatedly disillusioned about the difference between the way the world should and does work. Babies should not die because of a “fluke thing,” and a car should not be stolen in the city where dreams come true. They had also believed that there were people who could help fix problems, but they soon discover that they are on their own. After the carjacking, the police give them “their heartfelt assurance that there was nothing at all they could do.” When they hear a rat scratching behind their bedroom wall, they inform the landlord who insists, “he would get on it right away,” but they eventually learn that his words really mean, “You’ll be living with that rat forever, and if you don’t like it there’re ten other people in line for your apartment.” After their expectations are continually dashed, Charles tries to encourage Dulcie to come to an acceptance of the daily injustices of their world. Silver suggests that this acceptance is a necessary part of survival.

Style

Setting as Metaphor

Los Angeles becomes a metaphor for the clash between expectation and reality in the story. On their way home from a party, Charles and Dulcie drive through Santa Monica with its “nice houses. Pretty flowers. Volvos” before they pass the Hollywood boulevards where scantily dressed teenagers club hop while others wait to sell their bodies in back alleys and in cars. Couples like them move to Los Angeles in the hope that they can find the beautiful landscapes and happy endings they see in film, but most newcomers learn they must settle for the shabby, rat-infested apartments and dangerous sections such as South Central where one dares not venture alone. Dulcie and Charles cannot afford to live in Santa Monica; they must struggle instead to cope with their limited and ordinary lives, which for them includes the death of a child and a carjacking.

Narrative Flashbacks

The story focuses on one week in the past. Charles relates the events during this week through dialogue between the two of them and through additional details about the setting. Since Dulcie cannot talk about the death of their child, Charles must provide the information through flashbacks, which he weaves into the dialogue in order to illustrate the devastating significance of this event. The first time a flashback occurs, it takes place right before they get rear-ended. As they pass by the hospital where Dulcie lost the child, Charles explains the details of the death and then comes back to the present, noticing that as Dulcie looked at the building, “she sank behind the wheel.” This flashback, occurring immediately before they are threatened by the carjackers, reinforces Dulcie’s sense that the world is a terrifying place that cannot be understood. It also juxtaposes the two losses, the car and the baby a year earlier. Later, when Charles remembers how he scattered the baby’s ashes in the sea, he illustrates his concern and support for Dulcie, which eventually help her cope with the death.

Historical Context

In 1992, violent and property crimes committed in Los Angeles hit a record high. Although the numbers declined thereafter, violent crime remained a serious problem in the city, much of which, including carjackings and drive-by shootings, has been attributed to the city's gangs, which numbered over a thousand. This atmosphere of violence is noted by Charles and Dulcie, and they try to turn it into a joke, suggesting that if they turn on the television, they would probably "catch a freeway chase . . . Or a riot."

The year 1992 experienced a record high due to the riots that took place after the verdict was read for four police officers on trial for beating black motorist Rodney King. King had led them on a high speed chase through the streets of Los Angeles, and after resisting arrest, he was tackled and beaten with nightsticks by the four officers. The beating had been caught on video tape and gained widespread media coverage before the trial. The verdicts that acquitted the four for most of the counts were broadcast live on April 29, 1992. Soon after, thousands of residents, mostly young black, Asian, and Latino males, crowded into the South Los Angeles streets in protest. Other factors that contributed to the tensions included high unemployment in the area and the belief that L.A. police profiled suspects and treated minorities with excessive force.

The protest soon turned violent as stores were looted and burned, bystanders were beaten, and police were shot at. The worst violence continued for three days and prompted mayor Tom Bradley to impose a curfew and close businesses and schools. California governor Pete Wilson called out 4,000 National Guard troops and later federal troops to help restore order. By May 4, the riots had ended. Over 50 people had been killed; more than 4,000 were injured; 12,000 were arrested; and there was an estimated one billion dollars in property damage.

The beating and trial generated criticism of the Los Angeles Police Department along with police chief Daryl Gates, who were all accused of racism and brutality. A year later, after mounting pressure from the public, the four officers were charged with civil rights violations. Two of them were subsequently found guilty, and the other two were acquitted. This time, the verdicts did not cause a violent public outburst.

Critical Overview

Reviews for *Babe in Paradise* were quite strong, with “What I Saw from Where I Stood” being singled out as one of the best stories. Jonathan Yardley, in his review in the *Washington Post* determines that the setting is the “most interesting and rewarding” aspect of these stories: “The private dramas confronted by Silver’s mostly rather luckless men and women are often noteworthy and occasionally revealing, but it’s the sense of entering an unknown world that gives [the collection] its strongest appeal.” He also applauds Silver’s characterizations, concluding that “The compassion and sympathy Silver feels for these people are given deeper meaning by the good-humored affection with which she regards them” and that “she resists the temptation to take cheap shots at the oddities of life there. She understands that like people everywhere else, Los Angelenos of all kinds and classes are pursuing happiness, they’re just doing it in their own way.”

In her review of the collection for the *Los Angeles Times*, Michelle Huneven finds that “occasionally, Silver hits a wrong note” and that her “prose could also use a good tidying up: there are too many stray words and phrases and gratuitous explanations, and some stories are overly long, with too much dramatized or explained.” Yet, she points out that “the stories are ambitiously and successfully well-structured,” especially in Silver’s juxtaposition of flashbacks and present time. Huneven also praises her “in focus” characterizations, her use of “myth and fact,” and her observations of the southern California landscape, a “dark, desperate, down-and-out world . . . where the elusive instances of human connection and hope are all too rare, and therefore all the more luminous.”

Bernard Cooper, in his review for the *New York Times Book Review*, echoes many of his colleagues’ sentiments, insisting that “each story in the collection develops by way of careful unrushed narrative,” which “allows for an abundance of acute observation and for traces of optimism to develop in the most stifling circumstances.” He suggests that Silver’s “considerable gifts” are revealed in her ability to retain the “sting” of misery in each story and “to pinpoint the surprising ways that even the most disaffected among us are brought together, if only provisionally.” David Uhlin, in his review for the *Atlantic Monthly*, claims that “not all the stories are successful. But when it comes to small moments—the frustrations and regrets of daily living—Silver’s work is powerful and heartfelt.”

Reviewers who singled out “What I Saw from Where I Stood” for special attention include one writing for *Publishers Weekly*. This reviewer finds the collection as a whole “uneven but promising” with “painfully real characters and strikingly inventive writing.” While, the reviewer claims, “too often an exciting premise leads to a dead end, and characters metamorphose in ways that go unexplored,” “What I Saw from Where I Stood” stands out as “one of the more powerful and taut entries.” Megan Harlan, in *Entertainment Weekly*, concludes that while “some tales feel Hollywood-flashy and a little forced,” most of them, including “What I Saw from Where I Stood” “are deft montages of disillusionment.”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and British literature and film. In the following essay, she examines the story's focus on the transforming effects of compassion and support.

Marisa Silver's "What I Saw from Where I Stood" opens with Charles's announcement that his wife, Dulcie, is afraid of Los Angeles freeways. He soon discloses that freeways are only the first in a long list of things that frighten her—feelings that she has been able to express to Charles. Her greatest fear, however, is something that she cannot voice—that if they try to get pregnant again, the child may die just as the first one has. Charles recognizes how much losing their child has damaged Dulcie and has caused her withdrawal from the world and from him. In her sympathetic portrait of Charles's struggle to help ease Dulcie's suffering, Silver dramatizes how compassion and patient support can help promote a wary acceptance of the vagaries of fate and of the possibilities of the future.

. . . all he could think of was that he would die if anything ever happened to her. The realization of his deep love for her prompts him to see another option—to gently assert that life with all of its danger and promise can and should be faced.

Events have not been kind to Dulcie. One year after she lost her baby, she and Charles were rear-ended by a group of men in a van, one of whom pointed a gun at them and then stole their car. This incident reinforced Dulcie's suspicion that the world is a dangerous place and that she cannot prevent terrible things from happening to her. When the police are unable to allay her fears that the men who stole the car will try to break into their apartment, she stays up all night, trying to determine why they were targeted and what prevented them from being shot. Charles notes that Dulcie tried to make sense of the loss of her child in the same way, but then, as now, she failed. She was told that her baby's death was "a fluke," which plunged her into a harsh, random world that she could not understand or explain or from which she could not gain a sense of security.

Charles tried to protect her, however, physically when he grabbed her hand and started to run away from the car, and emotionally when he tries to ease her fears that the men will come after them. When Dulcie points out that the two of them know what the men look like, he tells her that the men are thieves not killers, trying to convince her that they are safe now.

He does this several times during the next week, as Dulcie's fearful state causes her to think that the rat that scratches behind their bedroom wall will get out and spread airborne diseases and that male drivers who stop next to her at traffic lights most likely have a gun in their car. Charles patiently patches all of the holes in the apartment and agrees to move the mattress into the living room and to leave the lights on so that

people will think that they are home and so not break in, all in an effort to help Dulcie get some sleep.

Charles tries other tactics to calm her, but they do not work as well. Humor falls flat as when she insists he put his voice on the answering machine, and he responds, “You’re worried about the rat hearing your voice on the machine?” Dulcie is serious about her fears and refuses any suggestion that she might be overreacting. She also refuses Charles’s attempts to physically comfort her. He admits, “Since the baby, we’ve had a hard time getting together.” At this point, Dulcie is too afraid that another baby may have the same fate as her first, so she avoids any suggestive or sexual contact with Charles that might lead to a pregnancy or even remind her of the possibility of one.

Charles’s compassion and patience have calmed Dulcie’s momentary fears, but they have not been able to help her accept their past and generate hope for their future. Charles feels that he is being pulled down into her world of fear and mistrust. One night as he is driving home, he is shocked by an egg thrown at his car and he starts to choke, almost losing control of the car. His sense of entrapment is symbolized by a fly he notices that is caught between the lamp and the Tee-shirt hanging over it. As he listens to Dulcie reciting statistics about how many people now have guns, he watches it “darting frantically back and forth until, suddenly, it was gone.”

Charles’s growing frustration finally causes him to refuse to give into Dulcie’s fears. When he comes home and discovers that she will not open their door to children on Halloween, a holiday that she had previously loved, he gently takes her hands in his and tries to explain that children are ringing the bell, not teenagers “looking for trouble.” But when she still refuses to answer the door, Charles insists, “this is ridiculous,” grabs a box of cookies and tries to give them to the young “cowboy” in the hallway. When the boy refuses the offer because they are not “wrapped,” Charles is reminded of the dangers that really do exist in their world. When he looks down at the other children on the floor below, however, who are enjoying the holiday, he cannot contain his frustration and declares to Dulcie, “We can’t live like this.” But Dulcie replies that she can.

Charles recognizes that both of them are “living like some rat trapped in our own wall.” He takes a long walk up into the mountains to clear his head and think about his future. He sees only two options: “I could stay with Dulcie and be as far away from life as a person could be, or I could leave.” As he walks, he thinks about the death of their child, but realizes that during that time, all he could think of was that he would die if anything ever happened to her. The realization of his deep love for her prompts him to see another option—to gently assert that life with all of its danger and promise can and should be faced.

While he is walking, he sees trash amid the vegetation in the canyon and decides that all of it might just be “fighting for a little space.” He carries that sense of acceptance of the things that make up his world back to the apartment, where he drags the mattress back into the bedroom. When he turns off the light, Dulcie gasps in the darkness, but he waits patiently while she gets used to it. This time, when he turns to her, she does not

pull away, and after a few awkward moments, “things became familiar again.” When she grows fearful as their lovemaking intensifies, Charles assures her that “it’s okay.”

Charles’s love for Dulcie has enabled him to create a safe environment for her where she can heal after the death of their child and gain the strength necessary to eventually confront and accept the illogical nature of experience. Through his generous and compassionate support, he shows her how even the most damaged person can find a way to open up to the promise of life.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on “What I Saw from Where I Stood,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer and published author. In the following essay, she examines the personality differences in the two main characters by studying what they each see from where they stand.

Marisa Silver's short story "What I Saw from Where I Stood" is, as one can tell from the title, an account of limited point of view. It is Charles's view of what happened to him and his wife following her miscarriage, and Charles narrates the story. The story illustrates how people read their environment differently depending on their point of view. To each person, some details stand out more than others, depending on the person's experience and his or her makeup. When two people experience loss, they may come away finding separate meanings in their shared experience. The significance of those details is determined by a person's perception. So while one person might be filled with fear and pessimism, as the wife Dulcie is, another person might focus on other details and be filled with awe and excitement, as Charles is.

The rat does not fit into Dulcie's imagined world, where babies are born healthy, streets lead safely home, and rats live in garbage cans or in someone else's home.

In Silver's short story, the narrator begins by describing Dulcie's fear. She is afraid of freeways because she feels she cannot control where she is going as well as she can when she drives along side roads with regular intersections and streetlights. Later, the narrator explains that Dulcie likes to analyze everything. She needs to know the cause of her circumstances, needs to know why she miscarried the baby, what she did wrong to have the car stolen, why the rats come to their apartment wall to make scratching noises behind their bed. For Dulcie, believing that she is in control gives her courage; she can accept their circumstances as long as they do not disrupt her sense of how things should be. Unfortunately, their circumstances constantly show her she is not in control, and so they frighten her. She continually anticipates something dreadful may happen. Suddenly vulnerable after the baby's death, Dulcie begins to dread the worst. Her life and her thoughts are constantly distracted by possibilities of doom. Why else would she be fearful of being on the freeway and having limited options of escape? It is because she expects the worst to happen and needs a quick exit in order to avoid it. Ironically, her avoidance of freeways made her choose a side street where their car was hijacked.

Looking back on the months following the baby's death, Charles begins the story the evening they drove home from a party: he was drunk, and Dulcie was driving. He sits in the passenger seat, looking out the window, watching the scenery change from suburb to urban setting then watching how the people change from guys with "pudgy girlfriends" to "boys strutting the boulevard, waiting to slip into some one's silver Mercedes and make a buck." He is leaning back, somewhat dazed, and taking in the details. Even

when the guys who eventually steal his car bump into the back of them, the narrator simply reacts to the slight dent in the fender rather than immediately wanting to accuse anyone for the damage. The incident happened; it was not big thing, and the narrator is ready to move on. Having been drinking, Charles takes things in stride, does not need to justify or explain them. But when he sees that one of the carjackers has a gun, Charles admits that he is scared. Now he reacts. He pulls Dulcie, and together they run away. As they consult with police, Charles is more able that Dulcie to get over this experience.

Dulcie, by contrast, will not let go. She attempts to gather all the details like someone piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. She wants the incident to make sense. In the process, she feeds her fear. The youths have the narrator's keys. If they look at the car registration papers, they will know where Charles and Dulcie live. Dulcie does not stop there. She imagines. If the youths who robbed their car know where Dulcie lives, she automatically assumes that they will come after her. If they come to the house, what will they do? Dulcie may imagine that they will steal their things. She may imagine that they will rape her, hurt her, and maybe even kill her. Fear knows no end. Dulcie obsesses about these possibilities. This mental movie keeps her awake and agitated and away from her job. Now when she drives down the road, she thinks about guns. She reads articles and memorizes statistics about how many people own guns. The man in the car next probably has one, Dulcie imagines. The woman at the market most assuredly carries one in her purse. Guns are everywhere, at least in Dulcie's mind.

Charles reports that he goes to work the day after the car hijacking. He has removed himself from the incident with the youths. When he comes back home, however, he discovers that Dulcie has moved things around. She can no longer sleep in the bedroom because there is a rat that makes scratching noises on the other side of the wall, and Dulcie cannot make it go away. The rat does not fit into Dulcie's imagined world, where babies are born healthy, streets lead safely home, and rats live in garbage cans or in someone else's home. Since Dulcie cannot remove the rat from their bedroom, she removes the bed. Charles says that Dulcie had been okay with the rat for a while. She even gave the rat a name, as if it were a pet. But since the incident with the car hijackers, Dulcie has lost it. She has too much to think about now. Her fears from the hijacking are all consuming. Now the rat is a vermin that can kill. Dulcie's perceptions are changing. Now everything is out to get her.

Charles views the rat differently. He does not like it any better than Dulcie, but he patched up all the holes that might give it access to their apartment. This assures him that the rat will not harm them. He feels like he fixed the situation, but Dulcie insists on their finding an exterminator. Dulcie is horrified when she sees the Rod, the rat-removing guy, put on surgical gloves. In Dulcie's mind this confirms her greatest fears, that rats are carriers of disease. In contrast, Charles comments, "This was a guy who dealt with rats every day of his life, and it didn't seem to faze him." Here there are three different people experiencing the same circumstances, with at least two different interpretations. When Dulcie learns that the rat might have come into the apartment because it is a warm, safe place in which to have babies, she reacts outside her fears of infection. However, then, Dulcie takes another negative turn. Now she feels guilty for

causing the rat's death. This thought takes her back to the death of her own baby, the miscarriage that she suffered. So the cycle not only continues; it expands. She blames herself for the baby; now, she starts to blame herself for not just the rat's potential death but for the death of the rat's babies. Readers can begin to imagine what it must be like to live inside Dulcie's head, to see the world as she sees it. Her perception is full of remorse and fear; her muscles are clenched, her heart beats fast and hard, and she dreads another incident that proves that the world is a dangerous place.

There is a brief respite in Dulcie's fears, which occurs when the baby's ashes are delivered to her apartment from the mortuary. The narrator is concerned that the ashes will upset Dulcie, but she remains calm. She even says something positive after watching Charles scatter the baby's ashes into the ocean: "I think that's the bravest thing I've every seen a person do." For Dulcie, dispersing the ashes was even braver than facing the youth with a gun and running away from him, which the narrator did just a few days before. Facing death at the point of a gun is different, in Dulcie's mind, than handling the baby's ashes. The loss of her baby strikes deeper into her psyche than the potential loss of her own life or that of her husband's. Maybe the difference comes from the fact that the baby has died, whereas the threat to their own lives is only a possibility. For whatever reason, for the first time in the short story, Dulcie appears to be a bit more at ease. The birth and death of their child has gone full circle. The story is complete. As she leaves the beach behind, Dulcie picks up a smooth stone and places it in her pocket, as if she wants a souvenir. However, she has second thoughts and takes the stone out of her pocket and lets it drop to the ground. It is possible that at this point even Dulcie is learning to let things go.

The story about their stolen car also comes full circle, when the police find it. When they go to reclaim the car, they find it is a mess. Even the steering wheel is missing. The trash the youths left behind is now scattered all over the floor. The car is not worth salvaging. The car is like the couple's history. What they were before they met, before their baby died, before their car was stolen is not what they are now. They cannot reclaim what they were. They must go forward. It makes no sense to attempt to redo the past by going over it piece by piece; it makes no sense to fix their car. They would be throwing away money on the car if they bought new parts, just like they would be throwing away the present, fresh moments of their lives, if they were to keep trying to relive the past.

Toward the end of the story, something happens that makes it look as if Charles and Dulcie have switched places. Dulcie tells him that life, in many ways, is like "a self-fulfilling prophecy. Everybody expected things to be bad, so people made them bad." It is as if she is talking to herself. But from this point, Dulcie seems to be shifting her perceptions. She does not want to identify the youths who stole her car because she is not ready to confront them. She does not want to reawaken all those fears they caused.

Some change occurs in Charles, too. For example, when he drops Dulcie off at work, he reports that she turns to wave to him, "as if it were any regular day, as if we weren't living like some rat trapped in our own wall." Now it is a regular day for Dulcie, but Charles is some place else. He is the one who feels trapped by his perceptions, and he

is the one who has to take a day off work. It is possible that Dulcie merely reacted sooner than the narrator to what happened to them. Charles might have had similar reactions of fear and anxiety, but they surfaced more slowly in him. Whatever the reason, he suddenly feels as if he might go crazy if he has to face other people's problems. He has enough problems.

So Charles goes for a hike and looks down at the canyon and watches the darkness lift off the land "as if someone were sliding a blanket off." Here, on the top of the hill, he views his ordinary life from a distance and glimpses what is really happening. What does he find? He sees things he has never noticed before, trees and plants, animals and trash, all mixed together. While the garbage might have distracted him previously, on this day it does not bother him at all. Instead of his wanting to go clean up the wilderness, to remove what he thinks does not belong in the landscape, he thinks now that every piece of trash as well as every stem of vegetation has a place. "For all I knew, this was one of those mountains that was made of trash, and it was nature that didn't belong. Maybe the trash, the dirt, the plants, bugs, condoms—maybe they were all just fighting for a little space." Charles has caught himself doing what Dulcie used to do, trying to sort out all the things he thought were good from the things he perceived were bad. It was a tiresome, unending task that had worn him down. What a difference it made to look at the mountain as one built from trash with nature trying to reclaim it, instead of looking at the mountain as being contaminated by the refuse. All things, in the narrator's new view, belong exactly where they are. The mixture of trash and the natural elements are not intruding on one another, as he had thought of the rat, but are merely trying to coexist.

So when he goes home, Charles attempts to reclaim his and Dulcie's relationship. He is not sure if there is enough left to salvage. Is it like their trashed car and not worth the effort? Or is there one strong element left that makes it worth the effort? He places the mattress back in the bedroom, a symbol of change that will greet Dulcie as soon as she steps into the apartment. The mattress also symbolizes the more intimate part of their relationship, one that has been missing ever since they lost the baby. Can they make love again?

Dulcie comes home and everything appears normal. She does not mention the mattress having been moved. They eat, watch television, go about their normal routine until it is time to go to bed. First, they listen for the rat, the symbol of their past fears. If the rat is there, it is not making any scratching sounds, is not distracting them. The couple relaxes into the silence. Maybe life is starting over for them, but they are both still afraid. What do they fear? They are afraid of opening to one another, afraid of allowing their hearts to be unprotected. Neither of them wants to endure more pain. However, they have come to realize that closing one's heart is just as painful as having one's heart broken. So they start slowly. Maybe they can love again. Maybe they can even open themselves to the possibility of creating a new life.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "What I Saw from Where I Stood," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

- Research the psychological effects that losing a child can have on a parent. Prepare a PowerPoint demonstration of your findings, including what most often happens to parents who face this kind of loss. Prepare to lead a discussion on what other ways Charles and Dulcie could have coped with their loss.

- Silver uses flashbacks to provide crucial information about the loss of the couple's child. How would you film a version of the story that would include the information gained in the flashbacks? Write a screenplay of a scene from the text that includes at least one flashback.

- Read one or two stories in the collection that contains this story and compare and contrast them with "What I Saw from Where I Stood." Write an introduction for the collection that specifically addresses these stories.

- Write a story or a poem that focuses on the frustrations or dangers of urban living.

What Do I Read Next?

- "Babe in Paradise," the title story of Silver's 2001 collection, focuses on a young woman and her troubled relationships in Los Angeles.

- Silver's *Direction Home* (2005) chronicles the experiences of two boys and a teenaged girl who travel to Los Angeles where they come to understand the complexities of family dynamics as they find a new home.

- *Understanding the Riots: Los Angeles before and after the Rodney King Case* (1992), by Coffey Shelby III, explores the tensions that contributed to the riots, including problems in the Los Angeles Police Department, changes in immigration patterns in south Los Angeles, as well as the Rodney King verdict.

- *Beloved* (1987), by Toni Morrison, explores the devastating effects that the loss of a child has on its mother. The novel's main character, Sethe, kills her newborn in order to save it from a life of slavery, but her feelings of guilt overwhelm her and push her toward insanity.

Further Study

Fulton, William, *The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

In this collection of twelve essays, Fulton explores the political and financial development of the city in the last thirty years of the twentieth century.

Kennedy, Marla Hamburg, Ben Stiller, and David L. Ulin, eds., *Looking at Los Angeles*, Metropolis Books, 2005.

The editors collected photographs and pictorial representations of Los Angeles from the early part of the twentieth century to the twenty-first. The collection presents a visual history of the city as revealed in its architecture, culture, and people.

Marx, Robert J., and Susan Wengerhoff Davidson, *Facing the Ultimate Loss: Coping with the Death of a Child*, Champion Press, 2003.

The authors have worked extensively in the field of grief counseling and in this book suggest ways to cope with the death of a child.

Rosof, Barbara D., *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child*, Owl Books, 1995.

Rosof, a California psychotherapist who counsels families who have lost a child, explains how grieving is an important part of the recovery process and how barriers to this process can be broken down.

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Cooper, Bernard, “City of Angels,” in *New York Times Book Review*, August 26, 2001, p. 25.

Harlan, Megan, Review of *Babe in Paradise*, in *Entertainment Weekly*, No. 607, August 3, 2001, p. 62.

Huneven, Michelle, “The Seduction of Place,” in *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2001, p. 1.

Review of *Babe in Paradise*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 248, No. 22, May 28, 2001, p. 45.

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Uhlin, David, Review of *Babe in Paradise*, in *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 288, No. 1, July–August 2001, p. 163.

Yardley, Jonathan, “The Hidden Corners of L.A.,” in *Washington Post*, August 9, 2001, p. C02.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535