What Was Mine Short Guide

What Was Mine by Ann Beattie

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

A fine example of one of Beattie's strong and loving characters is Mrs. Brikel in the novella "Windy Day at the Reservoir." In a nineteenth-century novel, she would be a heroine. She has raised a retarded child on her own but does not consider herself either heroic or a candidate for martyrdom.

She has not been a perfect mother, especially in the early years when Royce was very young and wild. Yet she has kept him at home, raising him as best she can until his fateful death at the Reservoir. She is a character in whom other characters confide because they trust her. In an unguarded moment, she asks another character why people confide in her, thinking she has won their trust because raising Royce might give her a sort of guru appeal.

The character, Chap, quickly agrees, and then realizes he has diminished her. With Mrs. Brikel, Chap is both more sensitive and likable than he is with his own wife, indicating that her nature somehow redeems him. At another point in the story Mrs. Brikel comments that Chap, in the right hands, could be something. The relationship is never developed, although Chap and his wife do separate, but the reader knows that the hands are Mrs. Brikel's.

A stark opposite to Mrs. Brikel is the vengeful wife in "Home to Marie." The husband, another Chap-like character, is going to a marriage counselor, trying to improve their longstanding but tenuous relationship. To pay her husband back for the times, years earlier, he has been home late for dinner, this wife arranges a party, even hiring caterers, but invites no guests and then leaves at the time the "party" is to start. The ending of the story adds to the reader's sympathy for the husband, as it recalls his staggering "home to Marie" after being brutally mugged.

In Fran, Chap's wife, is a female character who outwardly appears bright, capable, and energetic, not having obvious faults like the alcoholic mother Charlotte in "Horatio's Trick."

Fran has even helped the Brunetti's son by suggesting the drug Ritalin. Her many gifts, however, are not evidenced in her marriage, and she is carrying on with another man, also married.

Escaping into her Roman Catholic faith and booze simultaneously, Charlotte of "Horatio's Trick" is nevertheless the one on guard during a late night disturbance that her nineteenyear-old son sleeps through. She is so highly resentful of her ex-husband's new life that she never asks her son anything about his wife or stepchild, yet she gains the insight after a fight with Nicholas, and before her vigilant night, that she is afraid of life, "just sitting there, scared to death." The story ends far short of her dragging herself off to an AA meeting, but "relief suddenly sweeping through her," she realizes that her son does care about her. Like many of Beattie's female characters in this volume, she is in compromised, but certainly not hopeless, circumstances.

Male characters range from outright cads, such as Lou Brunetti (who by the end of "Windy Day" has confided to Mrs. Brikel all his philandering exploits, is reduced to tears and to perhaps the best that he can be), to what we might call the partially formed types like Chap and Herb (who show but do not fully realize their potential), to those who move in nontraditional but definite and positive ways through the stories. One of the latter group is Stefan in "You Know What," a deeply moving story whose main event is the death of an elementary school teacher by a hit-and- run truck. He, recollective of Mel in Picturing Will (1989), stays home to raise his daughter while his wife is the breadwinner. A bit neurotic, he worries constantly that "something bad will happen," yet when it does, he goes to the school after hours to make sure that the class bunny rabbit does not die also. To get in, he needs the janitor, a nicely sketched working-class character named Tony McKee. To his surprise he finds McKee furtively looking through a drawer to recover love letters he has written to the dead teacher. The two men exchange confidences and go off to have a drink at the end of the story. There is in this volume a wide range of male characters, the mugger the only "macho" one, most of them warmly treated.

Children are also important characters in these stories, and Beattie gets deserved praise from critics for her treatment of Royce, the retarded son of Mrs. Brikel. The normal children are usually bright and provide insights into their parents' characters, as we have seen Nicholas do in "Horatio's Trick." Some, like Anthony Brunetti, seem to thrive despite the devastation in their parents' lives or disturbing circumstances surrounding their births, as in the cases of Melissa, the stepdaughter of "Horatio's Trick," and Ethan, of "What Was Mine."

Social Concerns

As in her other work, the fragmentation of modern life, especially within her own generation, the lack of commitment in people, mostly upper-middle-class people, to themselves and to one another, usually exhibited in failed marriages, the escapism of drugs or alcohol, and the neglect of children concern Beattie in this volume. While some characters show the ability, insight, and courage to face the lack of certainty and make fulfilling lives for themselves, a greater number do not.

Alternatives to the nuclear family, or role reversals within intact families are explored in several stories, as in the title story where the "father" is the live-in lover, known as Uncle Herb.

Perhaps the "truest parent," although certainly not a perfect one, is the mother of the retarded child in "Windy Day at the Reservoir," who has never been married to the father of her child.

The collection also reveals an increased sense of violence and cruelty; the bleakest tale "Home to Marie" contains both icy revenge visited by a wife on her husband, with whom she's supposedly reconciled, and a bloody mugging.

Techniques

The stories in this volume range from about six pages in length to the novella-length "Windy Day at the Reservoir," about fifty-six pages, so that it might be said there are really two different kinds of fiction in the same volume. The short pieces use methods Beattie has been praised and damned for in her earlier fiction (although most critics have noticed a greater warmth and sympathy in the later work). These are a tendency to bring on characters almost without introduction, which one critic, Iyer, has termed the "chaos of first names"; a penchant for using many details to make a point rather than to state it outright; the distortion of narrative sequence in favor of some other controlling principle, a characteristic feature of "Windy Day at the Reservoir" and one that requires the reader to reread several times to see how the details all fit together; narrative disruption caused by juxtaposing short vignettes seemingly without transitions; and using characters' perceptions of minute details to reveal what is going on both to the character and the reader. The use of irony is so prevalent that the experience of reading Beattie can be like reading two or more stories at once, and sometimes the silences are more important than what is said, as McKinstry and others have pointed out. There is an improvisational quality that is not in any way the result of haphazard planning, as some detractors have complained. One story, "The Working Girl," is a reflexive piece that constantly tells how it is being constructed, so that the supposed willing suspension of disbelief is threatened, although in a delightful way. Beattie is a critically acknowledged master of the ability to make a single gesture speak volumes, so the reader should be wary of critics who belittle her for being too pared down.

The novella-length "Windy Day at the Reservoir" weaves the lives of several couples and other characters into a complex plot that unfolds through seven sections. In them, the characters in varying degrees come to some sort of assessment of their lives or insights about them, and the reader is let in, through complex interrelations in which both characters and events act as foils for each other, on a vision of what is important or admirable or despicable or pitiable about them. The technique portrays something short of a coherent vision or coda to live by, but it is not unordered. And a moral imperative of sorts emerges: that life is best dealt with by careful acts of observation and honesty with oneself, and that all people can do is the best they can in the circumscribed space and time allotted to them. Mrs. Brikel, having buried her son, sifts through the lies and half-truths of the condolences that well-meaning people have offered to try to assuage any guilt she might feel over the boy's death and concludes, "People were quick to forgive. They forgave you because they were eager to keep things polite and eager to get on with their own lives."

The story ends brilliantly in a way that is characteristic of Beattie: the refinished floor (used in "Home to Marie" to signal a child's delight before the refinishing occurs) becomes a symbol of "the buoyance of her heart."

Themes

As the title implies, many of the stories in What Was Mine are concerned with characters' recovering and understanding their own past. Many characters face loss and a sense of failure, but others are able to come to terms with and even build on their past lives. The protagonist of "Imagine a Day at the End of Your Life," who had worked as a milkman until his wife's career took off, reminisces about his marriage of over forty years to a busy detective story writer who has also produced five children. Portrayed as a sort of still and unifying force in a whirlwind of creation and procreation, a counterpoint to his wife, the narrator's imaginative efforts to bring together his life, both by his scrapbook of leaves and his imagined day, are deeply felt expressions of a predominantly good and loving family man. In the far sadder title story, a similar man is rejected by a woman after he has acted as a responsible and loving stepfather for many years to her son. In a perverted quest to hang on to the past, she has ironically carried the torch for her dead husband by withholding any information of him from their son and has thus unnecessarily fragmented three lives.

The ambivalence and sometimes sad compromise found in even loving relationships is as common a theme here as in Beattie's other work. In "In Amalfi," a divorced woman takes a vacation with her ex-husband. She is given a ring by a strange woman merely for safekeeping, but as she slips into bed, "something about the ring bothered her, like a grain of sand in an oyster."

"The Longest Day of the Year" has a variation on this theme: A separating couple shares a hilarious story about an emotionally unhinged Welcome Wagon lady — a story whose downside is the dissolution of the couple's own marriage. In "Honey," a woman in a seemingly stable marriage bonds to a younger man during a swarming of bees.

Often faulted for her lack of a redeeming vision, Beattie nevertheless shows in several stories in this volume that people can and do love each other and that some characters do live their lives in a way that makes life better for other people. Chap, for instance, cares for his elderly uncle, Marshall, despite the vexations of communicating with him.

Key Questions

A book of short stories, What Was Mine raises the question of whether Beattie is best suited to write short stories or novels, or whether it is valid to compare the writer's talents in both areas every time a new book comes out. Another issue on which critics are divided is whether her so-called detachment is an advantage or disadvantage, and whether detached, aimless characters produce boredom or involvement in the reader. In addition, Beattie's economy of style has provoked the same divided opinion: Does a spare style produce thin writing, or is the opposite true? (There is also the criticism that her work is full of cultural clutter, a seeming contradiction to the spare-style critics.) Furthermore, there is the issue of Beattie's social world, peopled largely by white uppermiddle-class characters, who nevertheless do react strongly to incidents in the lives of the less privileged. Is this a fault, or merely her chosen and valid domain? Finally, is she merely a generational writer, unconcerned with people before and after her time, uninterested in vertical relationships?

1. What is mysterious in "In Amalfi," about the bestowing of a ring on Christine by a woman who is a total stranger? What hint does the story give that the ring might not be an accident? What point about the relationship of Christine and Andrew does the ring and its effects and associations imply?

2. The character Elizabeth in "Honey" defends herself from the events of the day by looking at them as "something half-dreamed." Why does she need to defend herself from reality in this way? What has happened to her view of the other characters and of her husband?

3. Why does the Welcome Wagon lady in "The Longest Day of the Year" get so upset? Is the story about her truly funny? What implications does the encounter with her have for the narrator of the story?

4. What is the story "The Working Girl" truly about? What is the working girl working at? Characterize the narrator. What is she or he working at? Who might be the "we" mentioned in the story?

5. In "Home to Marie," what function does the young female caterer serve? What contrast does she present to Marie?

6. What comment is Beattie making about family life in "Installation?"

7. How can you characterize what is lost in the story "Television?" What is the significance of the character's nightmare about the roses?

8. Why is the son named Nicholas in the story "Horatio's Trick?"

9. Compare the two grown female characters in "You Know What," Francine and Mrs. Angawa. Which one elicits more concern and sympathy from the reader? Why?

10. Why is it that Mrs. Brikel is the one character to whom the others gravitate in "Windy Day at the Reservoir?"

Is the explanation that people admire her for her stoicism in raising her retarded child an adequate one? Why or why not?

11. What career frustrations has Fran suffered in the same story? Have these affected her marriage to Chap? Why is Chap not an adequate mate for Fran? Is their inability to have children a factor in their breakup?

12. Is Lou Brunetti's confession of his philandering to Mrs. Brikel something that elevates him or reduces him in the reader's eyes?

13. To what extent do you believe Pia Brunetti's career as a feminist author compensates for the cruelty she has endured from disease and from her husband's indifference?

Literary Precedents

In a recent interview, Beattie has discussed the influence of Hemingway on her writing, and over time, he seems to stand out, especially when one considers this volume. The use of seemingly cryptic images and symbols, which of course gain depth and meaning when the story is really read closely, is an obvious shared characteristic.

Thematically too, she is linked to him in her concentration on the dealings between men and women. This volume, like the novel Picturing Will, also features children and does not neglect, as some critics have implied, the "vertical" or intergenerational relationships. In this respect, she departs from her predecessor, although only slightly, as mentorship (not necessarily familial) is also a concern in Hemingway.

No one so far has mentioned James Joyce, but certainly the concern with detail and exact temporal circum stances is very Joycean. What is not like Joyce is that Beattie seemingly finds no need for ancient literary structures — the Odyssey and its twelve books, or Christian theologians and their multiple ones — to unify her work. Yet anyone can see that hints of such structures are present, as they really are in Joyce, as an ironic backdrop, implying at least a need for some traditional structures and values. And the sense of that need appears to be more poignantly realized in Beattie's work with each new volume.

Related Titles

The centrality of children connects this collection to its immediate predecessor, Picturing Will. Jody in that book can be compared to Mrs. Brikel, since both are single, relatively good mothers. There seems to be growth in the portrayal of the nontraditional, yet purposeful male. Although Herb and Stefan have insecurities and are subordinate to their mates, they are excellent nurturers, taking initiatives that count for those under their care. Many of the lesser characters here share traits of earlier Beattie "drifters," but there is a broader view in which to measure them.

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