Wilderness Tips Short Guide

Wilderness Tips by Margaret Atwood

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Characters

The individuals populating the ten short stories of Wilderness Tips for the most part belong to a reasonably welleducated bourgeois world in which they are modestly successful professionals—these are not working class heroes by any means, and the only truly marginal social misfits appear as nameless transients on Toronto's indifferent streets.

Many have a foothold among what might be called the cultural elite—college professors (Connor of "The Bog Man," Richard of "Isis in Darkness"); art collectors (Lois of "Death by Landscape"); media stars (the editorial journalist Marcia of "Hack Wednesday" or the television talk show host Susanna in "Uncles").

Some are only hangers-on to the power structure, while others operate in the big leagues but with decided ambivalence about the trade-offs they've made (the narrator of "Weight"). Still others gleefully wield power in the thick of the cor porate jungle—until, that is, they become victims of an equally unscrupulous player, as does Kat in "Hairball."

A few of the women exert authority not by dint of what they do but who they are—women for whom marriage has been a bad-faith career of sorts, like the middle-aged Julie of "The Bog Man," or Portia of "Wilderness Tips." For some, like Portia or Kat, a day of self-conscious reckoning is approaching or has arrived.

In contrast, Julie proves blithely indifferent to self-scrutiny as she holds to her preferred fictions about her life. The attorney of "Weight" has already taken her own measure but lacks the conviction to change—such convictions, she argues, had done her dead friend little good. Jane of "The Age of Lead" feels impotent before her convictions about impending natural catastrophe. And the failed poet Richard of "Isis in Darkness" ironically chooses to pay tribute to the artistic integrity of the true poet Selena by writing a critical study of her work, not by revisiting his own lost creative ambitions.

Then there is someone like Donny who is denied the information that would probably disrupt the unfocused flow of his current existence and offer him the opportunity to see himself clearly.

In making several men actual centers of consciousness in this collection, Atwood creates what reviewer John Bemrose considers a "more generous and evenhanded" depiction of males than he finds in most of her fiction. At the very least, in characters like Richard or Donny or George, Atwood provides a view of their lives from the inside, a process that inevitably deepens their psychological portraiture and makes them less unidimensional than men in her novels, who are typically rendered from the points of view of women who regard them, when not as downright antagonists, as combinations of petulance, egotism, and ineffectuality.

While still keenly attuned to the exertions of patriarchy, Atwood has increasingly depicted her male characters to the sidelines as marginal players in the dramas of

consciousness enveloping her protagonists. By according such dramas to the occasional male in Wilderness Tips, she expands her repertoire in welcome ways.

Along those lines, the most striking male presence in the volume is George of "Wilderness Tips," a Hungarian emigre whose real name, hidden beneath the Anglicized one he received in Canada, is never given. One of the millions of displaced children created by the Second World War, he learned early on about the ruthless exigencies of survival. His fluency in five languages "if you count Russian, which he prefers not to," demonstrates his talent for mastering the codes of whatever system he inhabits at the moment. He makes no apologies for the "skulduggery" by which he has climbed from degradation to power and which generates much of the sexual charisma to which women so consistently respond.

He has used his Old World cynicism to great effect in the New World, where a willful innocence of human complexity still shapes "civilized" interplay. He also recognizes his kinship with the patriarch of his wife's wealthy clan, the man who built the family fortune. His brother-inlaw Roland, the legitimate heir to that fortune, spends his time splitting wood and resenting the "oily" and potent George; having lost the edgy ambition of his trailblazer precursor, he is contemptuous of the cult of "Manhood with a capital M.... The Spirit of the Wild. It was naive, pompous, ridiculous. It was dust."

But in fact it is more sinister than that.

The story's wilderness motif is ironically contradicted by the elegant wooded family retreat, Wacousta, which had once represented a less effete agenda. Through Wacousta, Atwood exposes the links between the masculine fantasy or primal engagement with nature and the aggressive acquisitiveness of western capitalism which exhausts natural bounty for personal enrichment. George knows both experiences and has no illusions about either. He is an unapologetic predator with a smoothly unctuous manner for whom life has always been about taking and keeping—foolish disregard of that fact by those around him has simply made his efforts easier. In browsing through the 1905 copy of Wilderness Tips he finds at Wacousta (a book unread by the family heirs), he recognizes the destabilizing message beneath its temporizing platitudes about life lived outside familiar securities. The inevitable if delayed consequences of such rapacity may also inform Portia's frightened recognition that everything is indeed on the verge of "coming apart."

The most evocative figure in Atwood's collection is not a protagonist of any of the stories but the child Lucy whose unresolved disappearance decades earlier is the seminal event of "Death by Landscape." At summer camp in a remote Canadian forest Lucy distinguished herself as "an exception to a good many rules" and thus secured the fascinated loyalty of the story's protagonist Lois, who fantasized that the girls were "sisters, even twins." Lucy preceded Lois into puberty but did so with a certain ennui, already disillusioned about sexual possibility by the breakup of her family, the insufficiencies of her parents' remarriages, and her mother's continuing adulteries. It was in this frame of mind that Lucy suddenly vanished moments after having noted the allure of diving from a cliff she and Lois had just climbed into the crystalline river below.

With no splash, no rustling through the woods, no hint as to where she'd gone, Lucy dissolved into the landscape as though repudiating further disenchantment in the future adulthood awaiting her. Lucy—her name suggesting illumination, epiphany—refuses to enact her part in such a scenario any longer.

The gesture is a literary one, of course, for only in a fiction can such experiential maturation so thoroughly cease outside of death itself (a possibility Lois rejects for Lucy). It remains nonetheless a potent intimation of the imaginative alternatives art provides. Lois, the more mundane "twin" is left to move alone through life's quotidian betrayals, but she devotes herself to the collection of painted landscapes in the hope that art will return to her lost self—the self that refused to be coopted by life.

Social Concerns

Wilderness Tips, existential anxiety I nprovides the common medium for characters who are struggling with the steady erosion by time and experience of their youthful illusions and dreams. The perspective in many is overtly retrospective as middle-aged protagonists brood over where life has or has not repaid earlier hopes as the winds of entropy blow through their careers, their marriages, and the culture at large. Ecological catastrophe looms in a work like "The Age of Lead," which juxtaposes the discovery of a deadly new virus to the exhumation of a member of the ill-fated nineteenth-century Franklin Expedition to the Arctic. Modern science has decisively, albeit ironically, linked his death to lead poisoning caused by the soldering that had made tin canning "the ultimate defense against starvation and scurvy. . . .

[Yet] It was what they'd been eating that had killed them." A century later, the story's protagonist sees no signs of a less toxic or more self-aware society: the earth is relentlessly assaulted by acid rain, mercury and pesticide poisoning, air and water pollution, radioactive waste. And knowledge of the kind denied the frozen young sailor being thawed at the end of the twentieth century is seemingly useless in a consumer society where even the sidewalks of good neighborhoods are "cluttered with plastic drinking cups, crumbled soft-drink cans, used take-out plates. . . .like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment."

If the natural world is breaking down before the insatiable appetites fostered by postindustrial capitalism, the post-Cold War New World Order is hardly more reassuring. Western civilization's vaunted superiority as a delivery system for human happiness falls increasingly short of the mark before the ruthless market economy that is both its engine and deity.

The streets of contemporary Toronto host growing numbers of the homeless, and surliness reigns as classes kept apart most of the time mingle in public arenas where selling, not communication, dominates. While money still buys the affluent safe haven from the discontented and disenfranchised masses, as in "Wilderness Tips," most live their lives in architecturally designed boxes where the simulated reality proffered by the media disguises the spiritual barrenness of their lives.

The more blatant disruptions of that facade occurring in the borderlands creep into visibility through those same media, as when, in "Hack Wednesday," Manuel Noreiga's face appears on television screens throughout North America during the U.S. invasion of Panama. But the picture lacks meaningful political substance since the news organizations that broadcast it have become tools of corporations and as such offer entertaining technical gimmickry instead of informed analysis. The professional work place has been similarly emptied of the potential to validate or define the lives of Atwood's white collar characters. In "Hairball," a ruthless magazine editor named Kat is deposed by her married lover when she takes a leave of absence to excise a grotesque ovarian cyst that serves as a fitting offspring of their mutually exploitative relationship.

Techniques

Atwood approaches the depiction of stories in a realist manner suited to middle class life in contemporary Canada.

What is most striking about them technically is their careful structure, with no detail wasted, no excess verbiage clutter ing the scene. Some critics have complained that they are a bit too symmetrical and polished, like beautifully carved objects, and often appear mannered. But others regard the collection as Atwood's most accomplished short fiction to date, working its magic through poetic evocation instead of novelistic elucidation.

Atwood masterfully conveys nuances of character through carefully chosen remarks or gestures. She employs a variety of points of view, telling four of the tales in third person past tense, five of them in third person present tense, and only one—"Weight"—in first person, a telling choice since in that story the central character's anonymity contradicts her self-assured manipulation of men even as it reveals her loathing for the compromises by which she has lost her true self.

In almost all of the stories the center of consciousness lies with a single character, but in "Trash Romance" and "Wilderness Tips" the point of view passes among characters and challenges the reader's assumptions about whose responses will provide the most insight into the matters at hand. In "Trash Romance" the vacillating perspective between Joanne and Donny reinforces the absence of real understanding across the divide between the young male campers and the older female waitresses whom they study so jealously from a distance. When Donny and Jeanne meet as adults, the reader expects some long-awaited revelation that will make one side explicable to the other, but incomprehension is instead reinforced with Joanne's decision to withhold her secret, keeping Donny in some sense still a child before her adult wisdom. In "Wilderness Tips" the narrative shifts among three people: George the dashing emigre, Roland the milquetoast brother-in-law, and Portia the longsuffering wife. Point of view ultimately comes to rest with Portia, however, as the individual with the responsibility of deciding how to proceed when her intimations of betrayal are born out, her willed innocence about the world at last destroyed.

Themes

The accelerating pressure of time is a palpable force in the psyches of Atwood's characters in this collection. The majority of the pieces involve figures who are looking back over their lives, usually elegiacally but sometimes with downright bitterness or uncomprehending confusion. Repeatedly, the past proves its power to live on in the present in mysterious, sometimes deforming, ways. Richard, the middle-aged professor of "Isis in Darkness," has just decided to commit himself to a retrospective study of the work of a poet named Selena, a friend who had long epitomized for him the artist's quest for aesthetic and intellectual authenticity. Her slow descent into alcoholic disillusionment and literary marginality speaks to him of a martyrdom he avoided by choosing instead the safer, if soul-deadening, path of the tenured university hack. Marcia, the central consciousness of "Hack Wednesday," also broods over where her career finds her, although she is compromised not so much by earlier choices as by the changes in journalism that subordinate ethics and social responsibility to tacit corporate censorship. She poses a threat to the paper's new management and will be punished, she realizes, "For being as old as she is, for knowing too much."

Many characters do not quite gain Marcia's overarching vantage point in looking backward, for their sights are really still fixed on the present, with the past remaining a confused jumble—they have yet to forge the narratives that will permit them a point of coherence or at least rest.

Susanna of "Uncles" is faced with the challenge of making sense of a recently published kiss and tell book by a former colleague who resents her status as a television celebrity even though he has facilitated it. Now nearing forty, she suddenly questions her favored status among men dedicated to her welfare—the legacy of the doting uncles who oversaw her fatherless childhood: "Maybe I've remembered my whole life wrong.. .

Maybe I've been wrong about everyone."

Others understand the illusoriness of any quest to unlock past mysteries. In "Death by Landscape," Lois, a widow, realizes that there will never be a resolution to the eerie disappearance of a classmate decades earlier during a summer camp excursion. Unlike the camp director who imposed a narrative order on the event at the expense of truth and Lois's reputation, Lois herself looks toward pictorial art—the landscape paintings she collects—to mirror the ambiguous "tangle" that is life, with its "great deal of foreground that goes back and back, endlessly, involving you in its twists and turns . . . [T]his is where Lucy is ... . She is entirely alive."

While Lois knows that there is no empirical solution to the most vexing human puzzles, some of Atwood's characters do not even know the right questions. In "True Trash," Donnie, a young man in his mid-twenties, is denied the news that as a fourteen year old summer camper he had fathered a child by the waitress he had once defended against her volatile boyfriend. Moving ahead in his own life and imagining the dead end to which the generous Ronette was presumably fated, he is not allowed even a glimpse of the

truth when, years later, he encounters another of that summer's waitresses on a Toronto street. Joanne deliberately refuses him the "neat ending" so familiar to readers of the cautionary tales found in such magazines as True Romance—magazines she and her friends had scornfully devoured during their months in the woods ministering to privileged youth like Donny. Instead she assumes the capricious (and not a little vindictive) power of the artist to revise the design at will and makes sure Donny's reckoning with his past remains uninformed, "a story that would never happen now."

The most chilling evocation of time lost and reconsidered occurs in "The Bog Man," wherein the centuries-old corpse of a Scottish execution victim is exhumed by archeologists. The narrative belongs to a middle-aged, twice-married woman named Julie who, years earlier, had been the paramour of a married Canadian academic named Connor involved in the dig. The story juxtaposes her petulant account of their brief affair, with her sudden shock at seeing the Bog Man himself. Feeling this display to be "a desecration" of "boundaries set upon the wish to know," she remains oblivious to the way so vivid a memento mori speaks to her own mortality and the transience of all human endeavor.

"The Bog Man" illustrates another persistent theme of the collection: the continual struggle between men and women as they seek in one another some fulfillment of the romantic fantasies they have absorbed from the culture at large.

The stories of midlife stock-taking frequently involve assessments of failed marriages, lost loves, or, in "Hack Wednesday," the compromises necessary to permit two people to continue their lives together in the full knowledge of one another's limitations. In the "Bog Man," Julie's determination to test her hold on Connor against the inertial pull of his family backfires, but while she discovers his timidity, she refuses to acknowledge his humanity, and with it the pain she too inflicts by her rejection of him: that detail does not fit comfortably within the narrative she has constructed over the years about their relationship.

Distinctions between the quest for love and the quest for power collapse in several of the stories where predatoriness fuels both desire and competition. In "Hairball," Kat has her gruesome ovarian cyst delivered to her married lover at one of his elegant dinner parties as a desperate gesture of retaliation against his double faithlessness. "Weight" construes the gender divide in terms of all-out warfare as a female attorney to raise money for a battered women's shelter named for an old friend who had been murdered and dismembered by her besotted husband.

Her targets are corporate fat cats whose interest in her cause is nil but who fantasize sexual trysts for which they will gladly pay in charitable donations. Her cynical manipulation of her predictable "marks" alternates with her brooding over the abandonment of ideals she once shared with the dead Molly, and her acknowledged fear of the myriad forms of male betrayal.

In "Wilderness Tips" the sexual intrigues unfold over a vacation weekend involving a family of wealthy sisters, the youngest of whom, Portia, is wed to a charismatic Hungarian refugee and successful entrepreneur named George.

Having been brought into the family circle years earlier as the lover of the middle sister Prue, with whom he has had regular affairs ever since, he has never violated the unspoken prohibition against liaisons at the summer compound. But he will break his pledge this weekend by responding to the overtures of the previously contemptuous eldest sister Pamela.

Having settled for the appearances of marital propriety, Portia intuits that the house of cards that is her marriage is about to crumble and envisions herself warning them all that "everything's coming apart, you're sinking. You're finished, you're over, you're dead." Hardly a Shakespearean dispenser of wisdom and mercy, however, this Portia knows that she has always been regarded as softheaded and that any call to change their sordid lives would go unheeded, since she herself feels "invisible."

George's perfidy, then, will not serve as a moral watershed after all in one of the grimmer versions of marital compromise in this volume.

Key Questions

Short stories pose a special challenge for a reading group, but the meatiness of Atwood's pieces and their reiteration of several of the author's key themes should provide interest in how the stories work individually and in relation to one another. It is worth considering how the short story differs from the novel and what unique opportunities it accords a writer like Atwood who also works quite well in the more spacious fictional form.

Similarly, the group might ask if there are places in Atwood's prose where her talents as a poet are prominent.

The presence of two stories about the exhumations of ancient corpses suggests Atwood's interest in history and its uses by contemporary culture. Readers may be intrigued by the light shed on the present by such macabre encounters with the past.

1. What are the strengths of the short story as a literary form? What can it do especially well and what can it not do?

How would you evaluate Atwood's use of the form? Does she illuminate possibilities you had not appreciated before?

2. There is a distinctively middle-aged world view informing many of these stories. What questions emerge as people pass the midpoint of their lives? Which characters show themselves preoccupied with such questions, and with what effect on their lives in the present?

3. Should Joanne have told Donny about Ronette in "Trash Romance"? Why does she choose not to? What might have happened had she done so?

4. What do you make of Lucy's disappearance in "Death by Landscape"? What kind of presence in the story was Lucy?

Why has she been able to haunt Lois's imagination for so long?

5. George in "Wilderness Tips" offers a psychological contrast with the sophisticated and comfortable members of his wife's family—why does he continue to stand out among them after so many years? What is the basis of his identification with the family patriarch? What "wilderness tips" did he pick up from the world he left behind and the world to which he now belongs? What does one have to do with the other?

6. Atwood's interest in ghost stories is at work in several of these stories—what kind of ghosts are the Bog Man and John Torrington ("The Age of Lead")? Should Lucy of "Death by Landscape" be included in this category? Molly of "Weight"? To what ends? What effects do these ghosts have on the lives of those living in the present?

7. What is the nature of the battle of the sexes in these stories? How do men and women relate to each other? What do sex, power, and love have to do with one another in the histories of the various couples?

8. Idealism and pragmatism are regularly juxtaposed in these pieces. In what contexts do protagonists face the struggle between the competing world views they represent? How do they respond? Do these stories offer some larger commentary on that conflict?

9. As an artist herself, Atwood regularly challenges her readers to question the uses and abuses of art in our time. What insights into art's role in culture do any of these stories offer?

Literary Precedents

In "Death by Landscape" Atwood develops a striking variation on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which the protagonist's nervous breakdown following the birth of her child prompts her increasing obsession with the ornate pattern of the wallpaper in the bedroom that has become a kind of cell in the prison of her bourgeois domesticity. The assiduous keeper of a journal she keeps secret from her husband, the woman eventually imagines herself into the wallpaper, both entrapped by its designs and hiding behind them; like her projected alter ego, she creeps around the baseboards and literally throws her self-assured and controlling physician husband into a dead faint at the sight of her. Atwood's story revises Gilman's macabre rendition of the desperate measures to which conventional expectations can drive women; her protagonist Lois regards the various paintings which adorn her walls, as the true refuge of her lost friend. It is through art that the imagination projects its visions into the inexplicable. The child in question recedes from the narrative altogether by her audacious gesture, becoming yet another of those ghosts Atwood devises to haunt the psyches of characters who play by the rules and then must acknowledge the disturbances effected by shadowy others.

Related Titles

Two volumes published in 1995 show Atwood continuing to mine the literary possibilities of subjects raised within Wilderness Tips. Her poetry collection Morning in the Burned House (1995) includes a piece entitled "Man in a Glacier" which offers another meditation on recovered corpses from earlier epochs. In Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature (1995), a collection of Atwood's Clarendon Lectures given at Oxford University, she discusses the imaginative impact of the far Northern wilderness; included is a piece entitled "Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew," which deals with the historical events forming the core of "The Age of Lead" in Wilderness Tips.

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