Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years Short Guide

Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years by George V. Higgins

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

There are three main categories of characters in Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years. The first of these is the familiar proletarian cluster centered on Eugene Arbuckle, and includes the hair-dresser, Estelle Stoddard, her sister, Sharon, and their friends. They live in a world of limited horizons, but demonstrate the familiar emotional and moral toughness that Higgins often celebrates. The attempt by prosecutors to pressure Arbuckle into betraying his employer illustrates their vulnerability to external forces; Arbuckle's refusal illustrates their spiritual strength.

Attorneys represent another basic category of Higgins characters. The U.S.

attorneys in Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years are ambitious, but not venal, and they are given to realistic appraisals of themselves and others (Higgins's own legal career included service as an assistant U.S. attorney, the position occupied by William Pratt and then by Donald Murphy in the novel). They acknowledge that the sequence of prosecutions in which they find themselves engaged— charging Arbuckle to get at Farley, charging Farley to get at a former Massachusetts Governor (Frank Leonetti) or a current Boston Mayor (Sonny Donovan)—is political in nature, and given the opportunity, through fortuitous promotions, they abandon it without regret.

The third group of characters represents the new element in Higgins's fiction—the privileged. Ken Farley is a millionaire contractor and something of a saint, despite his colloquialisms and his dubious donations. His valet does not speak, but Farley is certainly a hero to his chauffeur; and a pair of nurses repeatedly praise his kindnesses to his paranoid wife, Nell. Nell's unstable character adds an unusual perspective to the novel. Everyone else, rich and poor, male and female, seems essentially pragmatic; Nell is a pure victim—irrational and self-destructive.

The title of the novel comes from her happy memories of the early years of her marriage.

Social Concerns/Themes

Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years continues George Higgins's effort to expand the perimeters of his fictional depiction of American (New England) life. His early novels impressed critics with the authenticity of their accounts of the lives and the voices of the men of Boston's lower class—its workers and petty criminals. Although Boston has remained the central ground of his fictional world, Higgins has broadened the social range of the lives and voices he recreates. The world now includes millionaires, politicians, journalists, ex-basketball and baseball players, car dealers, student radicals, a broad spectrum of lawyers (state and federal prosecutors, semi-seedy criminal lawyers, old school corporate attorneys), and, of course, a wide variety of workers and crooks. (It even includes an occasional woman among the protagonists.) The cast of Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years offers a millionaire contractor and his mentally unstable, institutionalized wife, Federal and corporate attorneys, hairdressers, nurses, and chauffeurs.

Although Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years, like most of Higgins's novels, employs a crime-and-justice plot, the principal crime here is a white-collar one involving the contractor's questionable political contributions; it occurred in the past; and the federal attorneys are more interested in using the prosecution to facilitate other indictments than in punishing the crime at hand. No one is very corrupt or very violent. The novel does not depend upon the conventions of the crime novel—cops and robbers, plans and pursuits, trails and verdicts and vendettas—to sustain the narrative. Rather, Higgins uses an inconsequential legal investigation as the occasion to examine the character of the investigators and the investigated. The values he emphasizes are those which preoccupy him in all his novels: loyalty (including loyalty to one's self: integrity) and shrewdness. Eugene Arbuckle, the contractor's chauffeur and one of the main voices in the novel, exemplifies the common man's version of these qualities: He knows himself; he accepts responsibility for his actions even when sued by an obnoxious drunk whom he had to knock unconscious; and he refuses to abandon a girlfriend who acquires the HIV virus. Even under heavy pressure from prosecutors, he cannot imagine betraying his employer. The wealthy Farley displays a similar selfknowledge and, in his relations with his alienated wife, an even greater loyalty.

The loyalties of the prosecuting attorneys are more self-serving. And Steven Cole, the obnoxious drunk who sues Arbuckle and who passes the HIV virus, serves as the extreme embodiment of disloyalty.

Shrewdness is a necessary virtue in the world of Higgins's fiction. His characters, speaking in their own voices, nearly always present themselves as shrewd, knowing individuals. Even people who have been judged fools by others, when they speak in their own voices, reveal unexpected insights into others and even themselves. The strength of Higgins's moral vision derives from this ability to grant even the least of his characters a native intelligence (and it is a strength directly related to his commitment to dialogue as a narrative vehicle). The characters are continually engaged in reading their own motives and circumstances and the motives and circumstances of others.

They know the ways of the world, and they know how to manipulate events to their advantage. They know how to maneuver personal relationships (usually through storytelling) and how to maneuver institutions, especially the judicial institutions.

Techniques

In his first novel, The Friends of Eddie Coyle, Higgins established the basis of his distinctive approach to fiction: an artfully authentic reproduction of the lives, views, and language of his proletarian characters.

It was, perhaps, the last element—the use of vernacular speech (dialogue, but more often monologue) to carry the narrative— which led critics to praise him and which has earned him comparisons to Mark Twain and Ring Lardner. Higgins has endorsed the motto: "Dialogue is character is plot." The motto's priorities are certainly those of Higgins's art of fiction. The judgment ofDeke Hunter (1976) is probably his purest achievement in this respect.

Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years illustrates the ease with which Higgins now handles this art of narration through dialogue. The voices of the characters, with their hesitations and elisions, sound authentic, and they also serve to make the narrative radically subjective: Almost all the information in the novel is filtered through the perceptions of particular observers. This adds to the complexity of the narrative, and sometimes to its obscurity. And as the more recent novels have grown broader in social range and longer in length, the number of dialogues does risk dissipating the narrative concentration achieved by the first novels.

Key Questions

Higgins's rejection of the crime novelist label may serve as a starting point for measuring his achievement. The label is not inherently demeaning. Moll Flanders (and several of Defoe's other novels) and Crime and Punishment are certainly crime novels. Higgins may not yet have written a Crime and Punishment, but his novels are certainly more ambitious than those of the generic crime novel, even of the very good generic crime novel (such as Burnett's Uttle Caesar or High Sierra). In his techniques and in his examination of his central themes, Higgins aims high. Are his aims high enough? Does he accomplish his goals? In what ways does Higgins achieve more than Burnett? In what ways does he fall short of Dostoevsky?

1. Why does Higgins use Eugene Arbuckle as the main voice in the narrative? What are Arbuckle's principal strengths and weaknesses? How does Higgins reveal these strengths and weaknesses?

2. What is the role of social class in the novel? Do characters of different classes think differently? Talk differently? Act differently?

3. Are Higgins's female characters as convincing as his male characters? Is there a difference between the voices of the men and the women?

4. Select a passage of speech. What is the dramatic situation? To whom is the speaker speaking? How does Higgins present the sequence of ideas and phrases? What do the hesitations and the faults in grammar and syntax reveal about the mind of the speaker at the particular moment, on the particular topic?

5. Higgins's own background and the content of many of his novels justifies viewing him as an Irish-American novelist. Books such as WonderfulYears, Wonderful Years suggest, however, that he refuses to be categorized this way. Is he successful in his use of a broader social, ethnic, and sexual canvas in Wonderful Years, WonderfulYears?

6. Though -he has influenced writers such as Elmore Leonard, Higgins's style seems to be inimitable. Can you envision another novelist telling this story? Try to imagine the story of Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years as though it were written by some other author with a distinctive style. How would Hemingway have told it? Or Richard Wright? Or Larry McMurtry? Or Ivy Compton-Burnett?

7. Is the neat fate of Steve Coles a flaw in the novel? Is the neatness a sop to sentimental moralism? Or is it a deliberate gesture which Higgins uses for purposes of contrast?

8. Why does Higgins introduce HIV into the narrative? Is it merely a plot device? Or is it a nod to current events?

Or does it have a larger metaphorical significance?

Literary Precedents

Although Higgins rebels with some justice against categorization as a "crime novelist," the crime novel certainly provides one context for interpreting his fiction. Writers of proletarian crime fiction of the 1930s such as Edward Anderson and W. R. Burnett are Higgins's predecessors in this regard. He moves beyond them in his commitment to narrating the experiences of his characters in their own language, a commitment which finds its greatest precedent in the work of Mark Twain. A third important literary manner which underlies Higgins's approach, especially in a work like Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years, is the novel of social observation, exemplified in the fiction of one of Higgins's favorite writers, John O'Hara.

While Higgins's approach to his material justifies regarding him as a major contemporary novelist, he does sometimes betray his roots in popular literature. In Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years, the only real villain is the very minor figure of Steve Cole, and his villainy consists in drunkenly abusing of his girlfriend (and silently passing the HIV virus to her), sneering at Gene Arbuckle's adherence to the fifty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit, and suing Arbuckle when Arbuckle coldcocks him to end the abuse. The novel's last paragraphs deal an all-toopoetic justice to the miscreant: Cole is charged with vehicular homicide, speeding, and driving under the influence. Such an ending is gratifying and neat, but it may seem more O. Henry than Higgins.

Related Titles

Imposters (1985) and Outlaws (1987), like Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years, illustrate Higgins's effort to draw upon a broader social scale for his narratives. Imposters features Mark Baldwin, the wealthy head of a Boston media empire and his attempt to prevent the exposure of a set of complexly related crimes, some of them twenty years old. Outlaws depicts Terry Gleason's attempts to prosecute Sam Tibbetts, a renegade student radical. The Mandeville Talent (1991), which describes an investigation into a twenty-five-yearold murder and the involvement of organized crime in a land deal in western Massachusetts, also belongs in this group of novels that expands the social world of Higgins's fiction.

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