Dark but Full of Diamonds Short Guide

Dark but Full of Diamonds by Katie Letcher Lyle

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Overview

Dark but Full of Diamonds concerns issues of love, loss, and growing up.

With humor, honesty, and insight, this novel presents the story of Scott Dabney, a young man of sixteen in a southern town, deeply in love with a somewhat older young woman who eventually marries his father, a doctor. Scott's mother died when he was twelve, and he projects some of his yearnings for her onto his sexy and talented young teacher, Hilah. Coming to terms with his sexual feelings, his grief and confusion concerning his mother's death, his hostile feelings towards his father, and his yearning to reconnect with his visions of happiness in his past, before his mother died, are all central to Scott's inner life.

Scott narrates his own story, allowing us to see his life from his own perspective. He is smart, witty, popular and talented, but he is also driven, haunted, and unhappy. His inner unrest leads him to do foolish acts such as going on drunken escapades and playing dangerous games with an M-l rifle.

Scott's social world is secure—he is generally self-confident, has many friends, and knows several young women who would love to be close to him. But Scott's inner world is confused and tormented: His life no longer makes emotional sense since his mother died. He blames his father for her death, and he has a vision, made powerful by desire, of Hilah loving him and marrying him. But that vision is an illusion. Realizing that Hilah can Author Katie Lyle.

not supply the link to his lost world of love and security is extremely painful but necessary to Scott. In a way it hardly matters whether his father and Hilah finally marry or not, because the real cause of Scott's suffering lies in the distance between his illusions, which are fed by his needs, and the realities of life, in particular the stubborn, separate reality of other people's existences which will never rearrange themselves to satisfy Scott.

Lyle does not preach or moralize about Scott's dangerous, emotionally desperate acts or about his illusions.

She merely lets us see into Scott's life honestly and sympathetically, through his own voice, so that we can feel with him but also see things that he cannot see or admit. He does mature some, and the novel does not end without hope, but it is clear that wishing will not change the world for Scott, and that he still has much growing to do before he will be grown-up.

The author has said that the story is loosely based on the real-life experience of a young man who fell in love with a somewhat older woman. She has also stated that she enjoyed writing the novel from a male point of view, in part because it gave her the

freedom to write about sex without having to worry that her readers will assume, "Oh, so she's done that!"

About the Author

Katie Letcher was born on May 12, 1938, in Peking, China, to Elizabeth Marston Letcher, an artist, and John Seymour Letcher, a brigadier general in the United States Marine Corps. She received her B.A. in 1959 from Hollins College, and her M.A. from the Johns Hopkins University, and continued her graduate studies at Vanderbilt University from 1961-1962. She married Royster Lyle, Jr., associate director of the George C. Marshall Research Library and Foundation, in 1963, and has two children, Royster Cochran (1971), and Virginia Letcher (1977). She taught in Baltimore, Maryland from 1960-1961 and from 1962-1963 and served as a member of the English Department at Southern Seminary Junior College in Buena Vista, Virginia from 1963-1987, including a period as chair of the English Department from 1968-1980 and as chair of the liberal arts division from 1971-1973. She has also taught as guest instructor at Washington and Lee University in 1987, as well as at Hollins College as writer-in-residence in 1989, and as guest instructor in 1989-1990 and 1992. She has been an Elder Hostel instructor at Southern Seminary and Mary Baldwin College, from 1984 to the present. She has also been a professional folk singer, appearing in Nashville and in Baltimore.

Lyle has authored a television series Footsteps, and has acted in various plays. She has contributed many articles and reviews to newspapers and magazines, including Newsweek. For several years, she wrote a weekly column of comedy and cookery for the Roanoke Times and World News, and she has written poems and short stories for literary magazines. She loves to travel in Europe, enjoys searching for and identifying mushrooms, is a talented amateur chef, and keeps up to date about archaeology, especially in the Aegean region.

Setting

The story takes place in the recent past in an unspecified small southern town where everyone appears to know everyone else. Scott Dabney and his father live in a big house with their cook, Augusta. Events take place at the local high school, the swimming hole at the quarry, the fairgrounds, at camp, the swimming pool, Beeman's hardware store, elsewhere around the town, and along the country roads Scott roams with his friend Kelly in the old junk-heap of a car nicknamed the Iron Lung. But one of the most important places in the novel exists mainly in Scott's memory and imagination: DeLane County, "just four hours directly west of here, just over the state line a little." DeLane County is the location of the many stories Scott's mother used to tell him about their family history: crazy, funny, romantic stores that mirrored her personality. It is the place she was always going to take Scott to, but never did. Scott believes in DeLane County, and even takes Hilah there in a desperate effort to recapture his lost past. But the real DeLane County is very different from what Scott imagined—a disappointing and much more ordinary place.

Social Sensitivity

Parents or teachers seeking a fictional role model for a young person in how to cope constructively with grief and disillusionment may find themselves somewhat disappointed by this novel. Its honesty precludes any simple, easy answers or resolutions, and Scott is not necessarily exemplary. But his humanity and his honesty make him well worth knowing and caring about. He has his faults, and he certainly makes mistakes. Among his faults is a tendency to dismiss others who are not as smart or as quick-witted as he is. Another, deeper fault is his egocentric inclination to assess the people closest to him according to his needs and desires, and to make their lives miserable if his wishes are frustrated. But even though Scott has a sarcastic contempt for naive young women like Buni Chenowith, he has enough integrity and caring not to want to give young women who are seriously interested in him—primarily Sudie Ives—false hopes by indulging in the comforts of their physical affection when his heart is obsessed with Hilah.

There is a brief and explicit sex scene between Sarah Ann and Scott, but it is not at all gratuitous and it only serves finally to demonstrate how crucial it is for head and heart and body to be unified for sex to be meaningful.

During his worst period of depression, Scott drinks excessively, swears, smashes crockery and other things, riddles a swimming pool wall with bullets, and acts unpleasantly in other ways; but these are understandable if not always excusable expressions of pain and rage. Furthermore, Scott teases Augusta, the morose cook, mercilessly, but in the last analysis not without affection.

Literary Qualities

The novel is structured by the passage of time; each chapter is headed with the name of a month, beginning with June and ending a year later.

In another sense the novel is structured by conversation, much of it in dialogue, but much of it also Scott's present-tense monologue as he recounts the events of his emotionally turbulent year. Scott is a vivid and interesting talker; or, to put it a bit differently, Lyle makes the novel come alive through Scott's absorbing and often witty narration. Lyle has an excellent ear for how people talk. Scott's way of talking and thinking defines this story: It gives it its edges and its substance. He is never boring. He has a lively, dramatic way of putting things. For example, he says: "On Saturday night at the fairgrounds, the river is lazy and yellow. Chickens barbecuing in wire frames give off smoke so sweet I'm dying of hunger. Coke bottles tip up just like in the ads." He notices things, and describes them, often with a vividness that verges on being poetic, as when he tells us about Augusta: "She kept her portable radio on all day, and carried it around the house with her. It crackled like ghosts singing gospel hymns from some dark corner."

Augusta is a character to savor. She loves to use medical terms and other specialized language, but she always gets the terms wrong somehow, which results in hilarious mistakes. For example, she says, "And you are hysterical from that strip throat," meaning strep throat, of course; or "Smiling Mighty Jesus" when she means "spinal meningitis." She is a literary descendant of Mrs. Malaprop, a character in the play The Rivals (1775) by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, after whom the term "malapropism" is named. A malapropism is a similar-sounding word which is not the word intended but rather has a different meaning altogether.

Much of this novel is built, in one way or another, on theatrical drama.

Scott says, "Drama Club is the greatest thing at school," and he passionately means it. Scott and his friend Kelly invent the game of quoting appropriate lines to each other in every possible (and impossible) situation. Hilah "loves plays like Mama did," Scott says. She is the drama teacher at the high school, and she teaches The Glass Menagerie, Death of a Salesman, Anastasia, The Tempest, and many other plays, which Scott refers to repeatedly and in various ways.

One of the novel's central themes is that the enchantment of language and acting casts a spell that is both beautiful and dangerous. It is dangerous to believe wholeheartedly in illusory scenarios, as Scott does when he casts Hilah as the woman who loves him and in a sense takes the place of his mother, who also loved to play-act. But the novel also shows the vital attraction, and perhaps the necessity, of casting ourselves in diverse roles, as well as understanding the relativity and artificiality of those roles.

Themes and Characters

Dark but Full of Diamonds is about Scott Dabney, sixteen, and the people who are important in his life. His father, Philip Dabney, is a well-known medical doctor. Although his mother is dead, she is still very much alive in Scott's thought and feelings. She was an amateur actress who loved to dramatize herself and Scott with glamorous, silly, affectionate fantasies. Hilah Brown is also an aspiring actress, but she returns to Scott's town to teach at the local high school, and there she falls in love with Scott's father. As Scott sees her, Hilah is a woman with charm, character, and sensual appeal.

In his mind, she is far superior to any of the women his own age who take an interest in him: Sarah Ann Darby, who looks "like she invented sex," or Sudie Ives, who is smart but bottle-shaped and like "vanilla ice cream" to Scott.

Both girls try to win Scott's affections, Sarah Ann by offering him sexual pleasure and Sudie by being his friend and declaring her love for him, but Scott's feelings for Hilah are too deep and intense for him to be able to allow himself to pursue romance with younger women.

On the home front, he mostly coexists with his father, who has sunk into drinking bouts after his wife's death and uses his work to escape from real emotional contact. Augusta, the cook, is a lively and funny character, a "Miss Malaprop" who always has the wrong word at the ready to designate an illness or a medical term, and who has a morbid interest in all things fatal and disastrous. Her turn of mind is so morose that she brightens the novel with humor.

Kelly- Davis is Scott's friend, and together they go on escapades, cruising with girls such as Buni Chenowith, rich but naive, or shooting turtles with their M-l assault rifle and nearly getting arrested. Kelly is Scott's old buddy, as is his dog Flea, despite canine bad breath.

One of the recurrent themes of the novel is acting, putting on roles. Scott's mom affectionately invented grandiose roles for her son, such as "King of Peanut Butter." He loves drama, and performs in school plays. Hilah is his drama teacher, and she teaches her student to appreciate a wide range of plays and characters. Scott quotes from plays frequently; the title of the novel itself, Dark but Full of Diamonds, is taken from Death of a Salesman (1949), by Arthur Miller, and alludes to the harshness and loneliness of the great world out beyond the family and to the promise and illusion of the wealth to be sought in the jungles of exotic lands.

Scott is desperately seeking the love, security, and romance of his childhood connection with his mother. He identifies the feelings he had as a child with DeLane County and with his mother's stories, which made him feel important and beloved. His fantasies about recapturing that lost world of his childhood blend into his fantasies about Hilah Brown, whom he has loved since he was twelve. He imagined that she returned his feelings and promised to wait for him to grow up. What he does not see is that Hilah has

a life of her own, quite separate from his, with needs and perspectives he does not understand, and that she does not return his feelings or embody the answer to all his yearnings.

Scott's efforts to reach out to Hilah bring him up short against unpleasant and unhappy realities. When he physically reaches out to touch her at the swimming hole at the quarry, he accidentally causes her to plunge too deep and gouge her head open. When he happens to overhear a conversation she has at the fairgrounds with a former lover of hers, he sees not only the ugliness of a jealous, mean-spirited boyfriend but also the truth that she is an adult, with adult sexual relationships.

And when Hilah finally does enter his family, to Scott's horror it is his father she decides to marry. In a reversal of the Oedipal triangle, Scott's beloved turns out not to be like his mother, and she marries his father, not him. But before that happens, his misery succeeds in making his father and Hilah miserable also. They suffer in part because he behaves so badly, but also because he suffers so much.

Some of Scott's actions are acts of desperation because he feels trapped, lost, confused, hurt, and enraged by Hilah's choice. He drinks and drives, he shoots up the swimming pool (an obvious symbol of his romantic feelings for Hilah—she was his swimming teacher at camp), and he withdraws into silence and rudeness. His ultimate act of desperation is to kidnap Hilah and take her to DeLane County in an effort to unite his fantasies of recapturing his lost past and his imagined future. DeLane County is nothing like what he imagined, Hilah does not miraculously decide to love him instead of his father, and Scott's own body signals the futility of his quest as he faints and collapses. Nevertheless, he needs to pursue his quest in order to discover that it is futile and illusory.

At the end of the novel, he has come to a tentative acceptance of his father's and Hilah's marriage, and he is able to turn his attention and efforts in a different direction. Even though the new direction remains sketchy, the fact that he has begun to re-envision his life is hopeful in itself.

Curiously, even though Scott does a number of risky, foolish, and potentially very harmful things, he never seems to be seriously in danger. Scott is subtly overconfident; he is a bit of an intellectual snob, which is evident in his cracks about Buni Chenowith, and he is secure enough in most aspects of his life that he paradoxically takes the disappointment of not being able to have Hilah especially hard. He loves to tease Augusta, and he is smart enough to see through most situations very quickly. His social position and his personality have given him a firm sense of his worth—but his deepest needs and desires are not going to be easily met. Thus the novel is about the hardness of life, about disappointment and heartache, about illusion and the strength of human desires. By implication, the novel suggests that Scott will need to find new roles and perhaps new stages through which and on which to enact his desires and aspirations. This is suggested in one of Scott's last conversations with Hilah, in which he playfully assumes the role of a Tennessee Williams character and says, with an exaggerated southern drawl, "Whoevuh you are, I have always depended on the kindness of

stranguhs." Scott will indeed need to learn to rely on the kindness of strangers if he is ever to fulfill his desires for romance and love. Thus he will have to venture out into the larger world, the world beyond his father, his mother, Hilah, his childhood, Augusta, Flea, and Kelly, into a place that is, as the title hints, "dark but full of diamonds."

Topics for Discussion

1. Scott blames his father for "letting Mama die." Do you think Dr. Dabney failed to do all he could to save his wife's life? What do you think Scott really thinks about this issue? Can you tell the difference between what Scott thinks and what he feels? How?

2. Why does Scott love Hilah? What memories does he associate with her?

3. Why doesn't Scott like Buni Chenowith very much? Do you think he would like her better if he weren't in love with Hilah?

4. What does theater mean to Hilah?

Why does she care so much about acting?

5. How do you think Scott feels about Augusta? How can you tell?

6. What does the conversation Scott overhears at the fairgrounds between Parker and Hilah mean to him? Why?

7. What does Sudie Ives mean to Scott, and why does he not reciprocate her feelings?

8. Why doesn't Scott's Dad punish him even when Scott wrecks the car or smashes the green pitcher?

9. How did the green pitcher make Scott feel, and why was it so important to him? What significance does DeLane County have for Scott? What does he hope to find or experience there when he takes Hilah there?

10. Why do you think Scott can't go through with sex with Sarah Ann? Do you respect him more or less for not being able to?

11. Scott says, facing Hilah's and his Dad's intention to marry, "I can give in, understand, make peace with what's apparently going to be, or I can confront her with her outrageous and insensitive betrayal. And there's a third choice. I can continue to evade." What do you think about each of these choices? How much control do you think Scott has over which of these courses he decides to pursue?

12. How has Scott changed at the end of the novel? What does playing roles from plays and movies help Scott and Hilah to do in the final scene at the conclusion of the book?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In a play, often the main conflict is between characters on stage. Analyze how Dark but Full of Diamonds is like a play in this respect. Discuss whether Scott's main conflict is with Hilah and his Dad, or within himself?

2. Discuss how Scott's life and his experiences reflect the symbolic meaning of that line "dark but full of diamonds."

3. At one point Scott describes himself as being like an addict. Discuss his addiction and how his behavior resembles other forms of addiction such as alcoholism or drug addiction.

4. Drama is one of the central metaphors and activities of his novel. Collect and examine references to plays and quotations from plays and analyze what they tell you about the personalities and perspectives of the characters who make them.

5. If you could be Scott's best friend and you wanted to tell him something that could ease his torment, explain what you would tell him and why.

For Further Reference

Davis, Paxton. Review. New York Times Book Review (November 15, 1981): 56.

Brief, favorable review. "Few writers of fiction for young adults write with such suppleness."

Lyle, Katie Letcher. "An Animal of Tilled Field." ALAN Review 9.2 (Winter 1982): 1-3. Engaging personal account of her life and writing.

Related Titles

Dark but Full of Diamonds is the only one of Katie Letcher Lyle's novels to be told from the perspective of a young man. In theme it is similar to several other novels by different authors. Katherine Paterson's The Great Gilly Hopkins (1978) is about a girl who fantasizes about her ideal parent, her mother, who gave her up for foster care long ago. Like Scott, Gilly is in for a tremendous disillusionment, though she seeks a somewhat different kind of love.

Even more than Scott, Gilly is tough and puts on a mean exterior. Like him, she is very witty and observant. She finds love in a place she never expected to find it, but she also experiences a shattering disappointment that resembles Scott's painful realization that Hilah does not love him as he wants to be loved.

Another novel with a similar theme is Queenie Peavy (1966), by Robert Burch. Queenie is also from a southern town, and she experiences a dreadful disappointment when her father, whom she loves and idolizes, actually shows up and is mean and cruel to her. Like Scott, Queenie has the inner resources to survive.

The play Death of a Salesman is in most respects very different from Dark but Full of Diamonds in its themes. But one central theme unites both works: the poignant attraction and destructiveness of illusions, fundamental illusions about life. Willy Loman and his sons, in different ways, all buy into myths and help sustain those myths, even though the evidence all around them contradicts what they believe, or want to believe. Death of a Salesman is about the fatal capacity we all have to deceive ourselves when we want something as badly as Willy does, or as Scott does. Scott is tempted to despair.

He thinks: "I'm convinced that this whole mess is a sick cosmic joke. The eternal universal secret is becoming clear to me: no one gets any satisfaction."

This disillusionment is the flip side of his capacity to tell himself that what he wants is true: that Hilah loves him, that DeLane County is an idyllic place where his mother's spirit still lives. The same doubleness of illusion and despair is etched into the characters of Arthur Miller's play.

Dark but Full of Diamonds was made into a TV movie which has the title My Father, My Rival. It won a Bronze Medal in 1985 at the New York Film Festival and has aired on HBO over one hundred times since May 1985.

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