

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant - Anne Tyler – Up for a Pulitzer Prize

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Novel Club

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The book was published in 1982 and historically represents our society 50 years ago or more. Essentially the 60s & 70s. Once I figured this out the book was much easier to understand for me personally.

The story is narrated at the start by the mother Pearl Tull as she lies dying in bed. The story takes place in Baltimore, MD during the great depression when times were very hard. Pearl is living with relatives and is 30 years old which in those days means she is an old maid but is saved as she finally meets a young sales man 24 years of age working for the Tanner Corporation. Quite a difference in age in those days and at that age. He courts her and she accepts. Pearl represents the quintessential woman of the 1930s whose only choice was to find a husband and raise a family. The only career opportunities were jobs like seamstress, maid, retail etc.

She tells us about Beck Tull the father who is a traveling salesman essentially meaning he is never home until he finally never comes home. He disappears from the story till the ending or resolution. The mother Pearl must raise three children by herself and proudly works in a shop.

Pearl Delivers Cody the first-born boy who is sickly. Then she has a realization what if Cody passes. She would have absolutely nothing. She decides then and there she will deliver more as a backup. Like a spare tire she mentions. The second child was Ezra who was complicated. Jenny was a girl she could dress up. Spare children are like spare tires. Pearl is caught up in the nurturing and raising of small children and will come to realize how complex child raising is.

Beck Tull is caught up in the corporate life of a traveling salesman working for a large corporation and is consumed with who is going behind his back and how to bring home more than his share of the kill. Beck embodies the "Organizational Man" of his time. He gives his entire life to the corporation and in return he receives some sort of reward? America had become disenchanted with the organizational man in the 60s and 70s which would lead to major changes in the 1980s.

Pearl appears to be an unhappy mother left to raise three children on her own. The mother throughout the story is compulsively critical of everything about the children but is very proud of her retail job. Probably the fear and anguish of a single mother trying to raise three children on her own results in a compensation of being critical of everyone. On top of all this there is sibling rivalry where Cody feels Pearl favors Ezra prompting much bad behavior. Throughout the story a sense of abandonment is present as well.

Cody (the oldest) who is self-consumed and successful. Cody represents the new American dream that working class people can have careers, attend top colleges, become wealthy which in the past was mostly reserved for those that were already wealthy. Cody is focused on his career and not relationships. He buys the gentleman's farm which was a thing to in the 60s but has no interest in it.

Ezra is a child of the 60 or 70s. He passes up career opportunities and drops out of the rat race to do something he really loves. Ezra is drafted probably during the Viet Nam War and the author tells what she thinks of that conflict as Ezra is ousted for sleepwalking. Many young men of that period avoided the war and actually did open restaurants. I can think of many that were quite successful. Ezra focuses on his own internal happiness and in return relationships with others.

The daughter Jenny is successful in her career but is married three times. In the 70s women had choices, careers and families, and birth control. Jenny represents the modern women struggling with her new found responsibilities and burdens. Essentially, she is liberated and now can have a full-time career and raise a family at the same time. Ironically, in Forest Gump Jenny is Forest's forever love who also chases the new found freedoms of the 1960s in a different direction like birth control, free love, drugs etc.? I see a lot of the 60s and 70s definitely in this book.

Cody's girlfriends are very attracted to Ezra. Naturally this makes Cody extremely jealous of Ezra to a point where he seduces Ezra's girl friend and Ezra is really hurt. Ezra seems to be able to bond with everyone he meets interpersonally whereas Cody cannot. When Ezra bonds with Cody's son he becomes jealous. At one point Luke runs away to visit Ezra and Cody and Ruth pick him up and return him etc. This theme is repeated.

The major conflicts of the story among the major characters are as follows:

- Pearl and Beck – which is resolved by never seeing each other again.
- Pearl is critical of the children and it gets resolved when she passes.
- Cody vs. Ezra's sibling rivalry which is seemingly ongoing but slows as they both age and mature.
- Ezra tries to bring the family together and does at the end of the story for Pearl's funeral and a meal in his restaurant.
- Beck tries to leave the restaurant but comes back. But there is never a conflict between Beck and his Children but sort of an untold conflict between Beck and Pearl.

Pearl Tull passes and most of her relatives are passed. Cody opens the address book and his father Beck Tull's address appears. Cody also looked at the letters from his father to his mother Pearl. Evidently Pearl had explained that father had been on a 35-year business trip. So, she knew where he was all the time? Ezra never knew this? Ezra explains he called Beck Tull and explained that mother has passed and invited him to attend the funeral.

The fact that Pearl and Beck never divorced might identify a societal taboo of the time. Also, the reverse could have happened in the story where the absentee husband father continued to live with the family even though was not a functioning member to avoid the divorce. Pearl describes him as the father and husband that went on a 35-year business trip.

The resolution is that Ezra is about to bring the family back together for a meal at the Homesick Restaurant. This brings the family together. The father Beck returns and recognizes Cody in the parking lot? He explains that he loved Pearl and in the early days she appreciated him but over the years began to take him for granted and became critical of him and so one day he never returned. In his meeting with Cody, he explains that the early family years were enjoyable and memorable but then he fell out of favor with Pearl and became all consumed with his work and in fact he missed this compulsion of

chasing the American dream working for the man until he finally has to retire. As discussed, this was a generational thing or an artifact of what many fathers did especially in the 1982 timeframe before the labor laws and taxation changes that were made in the 1980s to big corporation. Tull represents the American dream as I remember it in the 1970s and blends into work alcoholic behavior which still exist in society?

We see the children growing up and going in different directions perhaps influenced by the dysfunction of the family. We see their state of mind and then in the end how much they have grown. And at the end of the book, we all get to sit down and have dinner with Ezra and the family at the Homesick Restaurant

So, in summary we have this undercurrent of class and gender struggle, career vs. family, and the pursuit of happiness which were all popular themes in the 1960 and 1970s. The story shows the evolution of family from a working unit to the present where there is not an economic dependency. There is an entire genre of movies and books from the 70s like the Return of the Seacus 7, Big Chill which are dubbed the Boomer Reunion.

Questions

1. Was the ending or resolution of the story where the father comes home to have dinner with his children earned?
 - a. Did the author earn this through the telling of the tale?
 - b. Did it resolve the story?
2. Which character did you relate to personally and why?
 - a. Was that the intent of the author?
3. How realistic is a brother to steal another's finance?
 - a. What is the author trying to show?
4. When Pearl cleans Cody's abandoned farmhouse what is the author conveying?
5. Ezra slowly converts the upscale French restaurant into home style restaurant.
 - a. What is the author trying to convey in this transformation?