GENERAL

bad behaviour mary gaitskill

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Bad Behaviour Mary Gaitskill: A Deep Dive into the Provocative Short Story Collection

In the realm of contemporary American fiction, few names spark as much intrigue and discussion as Mary /Gaitskill. Her 1998 collection, **Bad Behaviour**, is a tour de force that challenges readers with its raw honesty, complex characters, and unflinching examination of human desires. This article explores the book's context, themes, narrative techniques, and lasting impact, offering readers a comprehensive guide to understanding why *Bad Behaviour* remains a cornerstone of modern literature.

Who Is Mary /Gaitskill?

Mary /Gaitskill, born in 1955 in New York City, emerged from a family steeped in creative pursuits—her mother was a writer, and her father a lawyer. She studied at Columbia University and later earned an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she forged friendships with future literary luminaries. Gaitskill's early works—short stories, essays, and novels—earned her critical acclaim, but it was the collection **Bad Behaviour**that cemented her reputation as a fearless storyteller.

Throughout her career, Gaitskill has explored the intersections of sexuality, power dynamics, and identity. Her prose is known for its precision and intensity, often delving into the darker corners of human experience while maintaining a lyrical quality that keeps readers engaged. She has received numerous awards, including the National Book Award nomination for her novel *Paradise* and the PEN/John Nevius Award for her short story collection *Open Grave*.

What Is Bad Behaviour?

Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1998, **Bad Behaviour**is a compilation of 15 short stories that showcase Gaitskill's mastery of character and narrative voice. The stories span a range of settings—from the gritty streets of New York to the quiet suburbs of the Midwest—but they all share a common thread: an unvarnished look at the complexities of human relationships.

The collection's title itself hints at the moral ambiguity that pervades the tales. Each narrative confronts the reader with moments of transgression—whether emotional, sexual, or psychological—forcing us to question our own perceptions of right and wrong. Gaitskill's stories are not merely about the act of bad behavior; they probe the motivations behind it and the consequences that ripple through the characters' lives.

Thematic Threads That Weave Through the Stories

Several core themes bind the stories in **Bad Behaviour**together. Below are the most prominent threads, each offering insight into the human condition as Gaitskill sees it:

- Power and Control – Many characters wield power in subtle, often manipulative ways. Gaitskill examines how power can be both a shield and a weapon.
- Identity and Self Discovery – The collection is replete with protagonists grappling with their sense of self, whether through sexuality, gender roles, or personal ambition.
- Isolation and Connection – Despite the intimate settings, characters frequently feel alienated, highlighting the paradox of human desire for connection amid personal turmoil.
- The Consequences of Desire – Gaitskill's stories illustrate how unchecked desires can lead to destructive

outcomes, yet also serve as catalysts for growth.

- Societal Expectations – The narratives often critique the cultural norms that dictate how individuals should behave, especially regarding gender and sexuality.

These themes are not isolated; they interlace to create a tapestry that reflects the messy reality of living in a world where moral lines are constantly shifting.

Narrative Style and Voice

Gaitskill's prose in **Bad Behaviour**is unmistakably distinct. She favors a close third-person perspective that allows readers to peer into the inner workings of her characters, while occasionally slipping into first-person or unreliable narration to heighten emotional intensity. Her sentences are often concise, yet they carry a lyrical quality that elevates mundane details into moments of profound significance.

One of Gaitskill's signature techniques is her use of **dialogue as a vehicle for revelation**. Conversations between characters are rarely mere exchanges; they are charged with subtext, revealing hidden motives and unspoken truths. This approach creates a dynamic reading experience where the reader must read between the lines to fully grasp the story's depth.

Additionally, Gaitskill's editing style is meticulous. She trims unnecessary exposition, ensuring that every word serves a purpose—whether to build atmosphere, develop character, or advance plot. This economy of language invites readers to engage actively, filling in gaps and interpreting subtle cues.

Key Stories and Their Significance

1. "The End of the World" – A chilling narrative about a woman who confronts her abusive partner. The story explores the thin line between love and control, illustrating how fear can become an addictive bond.
2. "The Big Picture" – A tale of a young artist navigating the competitive art world. Gaitskill examines the sacrifices made for authenticity versus commercial success.
3. "The Secret of the House" – This story delves into family secrets and the psychological toll of hidden truths. It highlights how past traumas shape present behavior.
4. "The Last Night" – A story about a woman's last night with her lover before a life-changing decision. The narrative underscores the fragility of desire and the weight of impending change.
5. "The Return" – A narrative about a protagonist returning to her hometown and confronting the ghosts of her past. It serves as a meditation on memory and the inescapability of one's origins.

Each of these stories showcases Gaitskill's ability to create vivid, memorable characters whose actions resonate long after the final page is turned.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Upon its release, **Bad Behaviour**was met with widespread acclaim. Critics praised Gaitskill's fearless exploration of taboo subjects and her razor sharp prose. The collection earned her the 1999 O. Henry Award and cemented her status as a leading voice in American fiction.

Literary scholars have highlighted the collection's influence on contemporary short story writers. Gaitskill's emphasis on psychological realism and moral ambiguity has inspired a generation of authors to push the boundaries of genre conventions. Her work is frequently cited in courses on modern American literature, feminist theory, and creative writing.

Moreover, the book's enduring popularity is evident in its continued presence on reading lists, book club discussions, and academic syllabi. The stories' universal themes—love, betrayal, identity—ensure that new readers discover fresh relevance with each iteration.

Why Bad Behaviour Still Resonates Today

In an era where conversations around consent, power dynamics, and personal agency are more prominent than ever, Gaitskill's stories feel eerily prescient. The collection anticipates many of the societal debates that dominate today's cultural discourse, offering a mirror that reflects both the progress made and the challenges that persist.

Additionally, Gaitskill's nuanced portrayal of female sexuality defies simplistic categorization. Her characters are neither wholly virtuous nor entirely villainous; they are complex, flawed, and ultimately human. This realism allows readers to empathize with characters across a spectrum of moral choices, fostering a deeper understanding of the human psyche.

Finally, the collection's stylistic elegance—its blend of lyrical prose and stark realism—creates a timeless reading experience. Readers find themselves drawn to the stories' emotional intensity and narrative craftsmanship, ensuring that **Bad Behaviour** remains a touchstone for literary excellence.

How to Read and Appreciate the Collection

Approaching **Bad Behaviour**with an open mind enhances the reading experience. Below are practical tips to help readers engage deeply with Gaitskill's work:

- Read Actively – Take notes on recurring motifs, character arcs, and narrative techniques. This practice encourages critical thinking and retention.
- Consider Context – Research the historical and cultural backdrop of each story. Understanding the social climate of the late 1990s can illuminate Gaitskill's commentary.
- Reflect on Personal Biases – Gaitskill's stories often challenge conventional morality. Being aware of one's own preconceptions allows for a more nuanced interpretation.
- Discuss with Others – Join a book club or online forum. Sharing perspectives can reveal insights you might have missed.
- – Read the collection again after a few months. New experiences can alter your perception of the characters and themes.

By employing these strategies, readers can fully appreciate the depth and complexity of Gaitskill's storytelling.

Conclusion

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