



## Escapes

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

The stories of Joy Williams resemble those of her better-known contemporary Ann Beattie and have also been compared to those of Raymond Carver, whose death cut short an exceptionally promising career. What the three have in common is inadequately covered by the term “minimalism.” They are parsimonious in description and exposition; they shun subjective interpretation with the abhorrence of behaviorist psychologists and delight in picking out the little concrete details that serve as natural metaphors; their dialogue is deliberately mundane and seldom advances the plot. In fact, there is often no plot to advance: They avoid such traditional devices as narrative hooks, escalating conflicts, turning points, and denouements. Their characters seldom change, and the fact that they are incapable of change is often the essence of the tragedy. All three authors flirt shamelessly with what editors used to condemn as “slices of life” or “vignettes.” They are Chekhovians with a vengeance.

While the typical Carver character is an unskilled laborer and the typical Beattie character a college-educated professional, the typical Williams character is harder to pin down. Her people are often unemployed, widowed or divorced, homeless, chronically on the move, rootless if not utterly desperate. The opening of a story titled “The Little Winter” is characteristic: “She was in the airport, waiting for her flight to be called, when a woman came to a phone near her chair.” The protagonist is dying of a brain tumor and searching for someone who might conceivably care. In “Lu-Lu,” a young woman who is described as “young and desperate” adopts an enormous boa constrictor and drives off into the desert sun. “The Route” documents a miserable vacation trip; the opening line, “We had the car so we went,” reflects the spirit of Williams’ fiction. Cars figure prominently in her stories. In “The Skater,” a man and woman are driving all over New England desperately looking for a boarding school where their daughter might be safe from the invisible nemesis that claimed her sister. There is a great deal of death and dying, evoking existential dread.

Joy Williams is a significant writer because her work reflects the malaise of our uprooted times. It also reflects the outlook of a sensitive writer struggling to endure in an indifferent society dominated by electronic media.

## Sources for Further Study

*Boston Globe*. December 29, 1989, p.71.

*Chicago Tribune*. January 14, 1990, XIV, p.1.

*The Houston Post*. January 21, 1990, p. C6.

*Kenyon Review*. LVII, November 15, 1989, p.1633.

*Listener*. CXXIV, July 5, 1990, p.32.

*Los Angeles Times*. December 25, 1989, p. E12.

*New Statesman and Society*. III, June 22, 1990, p.51.

## Escapes: Escapes

*The New York Times Book Review*. XCV, January 21, 1990, p. 9.

*Newsweek*. CXV, February 26, 1990, p.64.

*Publishers Weekly*. CCXXXVI, November 3' 1989, p.82.

*The Washington Post Book World*. XX, February 11, 1990, p.5.

### **Copyright Notice**

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:

<http://www.enotes.com/escapes-salem>