

# 81 Getting Even

## Side Effects

## Without Feathers

*Woody Allen*

I don't want to achieve immortality through my work.... I want to achieve it through not dying," Woody Allen said years ago. Part of the appeal of Allen's humor is that often his characters verbalize what everyone is thinking but no one will actually say. And his quintessentially Jewish-American persona, as the neurotic intellectual, appears nonthreatening; he's a small, balding man—a zany and charming worrier. His contributions to American film and writing are unique.

His earlier off-the-wall comedies included a multitude of ridiculously perfect scenes. Who can forget the famous scene in *Annie Hall* where Marshall McLuhan actually steps out from behind a poster in a movie theater to correct a pretentious man as he pontificates about McLuhan's intentions?

Fortunately, Allen's talents are not limited to the screen. His fiction, mostly comprised of short stories, is found in three volumes: *Getting Even* (1978), *Side Effects*, (1980) and *Without Feathers* (1986). *Getting Even* is probably the funniest.

There is lightheartedness to Allen's written humor, evocative of his early films. The writings comprised in these three books were produced fairly early on in his career (*Manhattan* was his most recent film when the last volume, *Side Effects*, was published as a collection). The situations are absurd, and he plays them out to their fullest extreme.

Opening lines are tremendously important in fiction, much like first impressions in real life. *Side Effects* begins with a short story, "Remembering Needleman": "It has been four weeks and it is still hard for me to believe Sandor Needleman is dead. I was present at the cremation and at his son's request, brought the marshmallows, but few of us could think of anything but our pain."

In *Side Effects*, "The Kugelmass Episode" is one of the funniest stories. Sidney Kugelmass, a professor of humanities at City College, is on his second marriage, to a woman he wed because she had both potential and money—but she's let herself go and looks like a beach ball. Unhappy and lusting, Kugelmass confides his desires to his analyst, who tells him he shouldn't act out these feelings, but rather explore them in therapy. Kugelmass quits therapy.

Soon he gets a call from Persky, a magician who had learned of his desires. In Persky's apartment, Kugelmass stares at a poorly lacquered Chinese cabinet with rhinestones glued on it, which, Persky explains, is a time machine. Meet any woman in literature, Kugelmass tells him, by getting into the cabinet with the book in which the woman appears, and you'll join her in its pages.

Soon Kugelmass finds himself in Emma Bovary's house in Yonville, where their love affair begins. Of course, there are glitches, and things don't wind up as smoothly as Kugelmass was told. (Meanwhile, another professor is reading about a character named Kugelmass in *Madame Bovary*!)

Another classic Woody Allen story is *The U.F.O. Menace*, in which various sightings are reported. Allen's tongue-in-cheek tone is delivered deadpan, as he creates one-of-a-kind characters who are either so unappealing or ridiculously absurd that one can't help but laugh. Regarding a U.F.O. sighting: "One of the eeriest accounts occurred in August 1975, to a man on Montauk Point, in Long Island: 'I was in bed at my beach house, but could not sleep because of some fried chicken in the icebox that I felt entitled to. I waited till my wife dropped off, and tiptoed into the kitchen. I remember looking at the clock. It was precisely four-fifteen. I'm quite certain of this, because our kitchen clock has not worked in twenty-one years and is always at that time. I also noticed that our dog, Judas, was acting funny. He was standing up on his hind legs and singing, "I Enjoy Being a Girl." Suddenly the room turned bright orange.'"

This silly, lighthearted humor is typical of all three volumes, which can be easily read in short spurts. The first section of *Side Effects* is entitled "Selections From the Allen Notebooks," and includes his pondering: "Should I Marry W.? Not if she won't tell me the other letters in her name."

Allen's characteristic irreverence also occurs in his treatment of biblical passages. For example, in *Without Feathers*, one chapter, entitled "The Scrolls," has Allen's versions of biblical stories, including the following anecdote: "And it came to pass that a man who sold shirts was smitten by hard times." He prays to God, and the Lord tells the man: "Put an alligator over the pocket." Lo and behold, his shirts began to sell....

In *Getting Even*, there is a chapter entitled "Hassidic Tales." A man with a heavy heart visits Rabbi Shimmel of Cracow. "God has given me an ugly daughter." "How ugly?" the Seer asked. "If she were lying on a plate with a herring, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

After the text in each book ends, a few paragraphs tell us about the author. We are reminded that Allen was expelled from both New York University and City College. These miniature profiles each end with "His one regret in life is that he is not someone else."