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Paper #2: Close Reading

ENGL 103-06

Judging a Book by its Cover

In his essay, “Mr. and Mrs. B,” novelist Alexander Chee tells the story of his working for William F. and Pat Buckley, both of whom held significance to Chee before he began working for them. William F. was the writer of an op-ed in the *New York Times*, where he “advocated for the tattooing of people with AIDS” (Chee 3). William F.’s wife, Pat Buckley, “was the preeminent socialite” (Chee 2) of New York, where Chee moved in 1991.

In this paper, I hope to examine how Alexander Chee’s essay, describing his time working as a cater-waiter for William F. and Pat Buckley, speaks to today’s era. In “Mr. and Mrs. B,” Alexander Chee reflects on his evolving self-construction and resulting judgment of others, which he does through an intimate, confessional tone. The importance of Chee’s essay lies in the nuance it represents in its characters, speaking to an era fraught with increased polarization, othering, and “cancel culture.”

The first-person narrative point of view, and the resulting intimate and confessional tone of Chee’s essay, facilitates glimpses into Chee’s own self-construction. Chee’s personal narration validates for himself and to the reader, from what is likely a place of insecurity, the identity he forms around his own character. Chee feels “a little like James Bond” (Chee 3); he looks good in a tuxedo, he gets to “access the interiors of people’s lives” (Chee 2), and as “clients usually treat [him] like human furniture . . . [he sees] them in unguarded moments” (Chee 3). Through his inner narrative and perspective, Chee sees his working for “one of

America's most famous homophobes" (Chee 7), whom he knows "in the same way that every gay man . . . [knows] him: as an enemy" (Chee 3), as justified. Chee partially justifies his working for the Buckleys (specifically Mr. B) by identifying as a struggling New Yorker. The infamous struggle of living in New York puts a great amount of significance on the setting, especially as it informs decisions on the basis on "making it" in New York. In addition, Chee's self-identity as a gay activist reflects the New York setting, creating a sense (for Chee) of infiltrating an elite upper-class. His self-identification as an activist and as a struggling young writer, living in a city famous for impelling a constant struggle to survive, informs much of Chee's positionality in reference to the two titular characters. Chee self-construction establishes William F. Buckley as the antithesis of what Chee stands for and establishes William F.'s wife, Pat, as a hero.

The primary conflict in "Mr. and Mrs. B" is character vs. self, as Chee grapples with the reality of his perceptions of William F. and Pat Buckley. Much of Chee's initial admiration for Pat Buckley and contempt towards William F. is based on their own outward, public presentation of their opinions around AIDS (which is a social justice issue that Chee cares deeply about). However, Chee's postulation that the complications of working for the Buckleys would revolve around his proximity to William F. is almost immediately discounted. Chee finds that William F. does not align with his perception of a wealthy New York elite; William F. lives relatively frugally, as Pat Buckley is "the one with the money, after all" (Chee 5). William F. becomes a secondary character in Chee's essay; his presence as a foil to Chee's identity defines much of Chee's conflict and motivations, and yet Mr. B is relatively extraneous to Chee's experience working for the Buckleys. Chee suggests that Mr. and Mrs. B's relationship "*was* strange. It was also complicated" (Chee 7). As it turned out, the trials of Chee's employment revolve primarily

around Pat. For instance, Chee is punished for (relatively inconsequentially) clearing and serving plates from the wrong side. Even though Pat “glar[ed] at [him] as if [he’d] personally done it to hurt her feelings” (Chee 6), Chee he admires her, even “blush[ing] a little, like someone in love” (Chee 6) when he hands Pat her shoes. The conflict of Chee’s essay does not stem from Chee’s proximity to William F. Buckley, it stems from Chee’s navigating the contradictions between his perception of the characters of Mr. and Mrs. B and his experiences working for them.

The emotional climax of Chee’s essay is the interaction he has with Pat Buckley. Even though Chee sees “Mr. Buckley head to the pool with a dark-haired young man” (Chee 8), it is Pat’s entering the room Chee is changing in, her “loom[ing] there like a ghost” (Chee 8), her mysteriously thanking Chee, and her “set[ting] her long fingers down the into the hair on [Chee’s] chest” (Chee 8) that is of the greatest emotional significance to Chee. Chee follows his describing of this interaction with the quote: “Waiters and escorts both know that indiscretion is a career-ending move. You only reveal a secret if you are never going back again...” (Chee 8). Chee’s interaction with Pat is significant, not only because it occurs almost immediately after seeing William F. heading to the pool, but also because it greatly impacts Chee’s image of Mrs. B. Chee considers this moment to be “the climax of [his] life as a cater-waiter” (Chee 9), and while Chee creates ambiguity around whether he is referring to Mr. or Mrs. B, it is the moment of interaction with Pat that represents the emotional climax.

Chee’s experience of the complexity of Mr. and Mrs. B speaks to the othering of people, based on their positionality, status, or opinions, in today’s era. In addition, Chee’s narrative portrayal of William F. is (justifiably) intolerant, speaking to the insubstantially comprehensive portrayal of people (especially those in the public eye) in the “cancel culture” of today’s era. Even while acknowledging Mr. B’s comments about tattooing people with AIDS, Chee ends his

essay having cultivated a level of empathy towards him. There is a stark contrast between Chee's initial judgments of Mr. and Mrs. B's characters and the nuance which he begins to understand.

This contrast should be considered a central theme of Chee's essay.

Works Cited

Chee, Alexander. "Mr. and Mrs. B." *Apology Magazine* , 30 Apr. 2014,

longreads.com/2015/06/18/mr-and-mrs-b/.