

The background of the cover is a watercolor painting. It depicts a landscape with a path or stream winding through it. The colors are soft and blended, featuring shades of yellow, green, and brown. The style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of light and atmosphere. The path leads from the bottom left towards the center, and there are some dark, indistinct shapes that could be trees or rocks on the right side.

**ALFRED AND
GUINEVERE**
JAMES SCHUYLER

INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN ASHBERY

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

CLASSICS

ALFRED AND GUINEVERE

JAMES SCHUYLER (1923–1991) was a preeminent figure in the celebrated New York School of Poets. He grew up in Washington, D.C., and near Buffalo, New York. After World War II, he made his way to Italy, where he served for a time as W.H. Auden's secretary. His books include two other novels, *What's for Dinner* and *A Nest of Ninnies* (written with John Ashbery), as well as numerous volumes of poetry.

JOHN ASHBERRY, the author of twenty collections of poetry, was born in Rochester, New York, in 1927 and educated at Harvard and Columbia Universities. He is Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., Professor of Language and Literature at Bard College and lives in New York City and Hudson, New York.

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New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

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This edition published in 2001 in the United States of America by
The New York Review of Books, 1755 Broadway New York, NY 10019

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Schuyler, James.

Alfred and Guinevere / James Schuyler ; introduction by John Ashbery.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-940322-49-8 (alk. paper)

1. Grandmothers—Fiction. 2. Country life—Fiction. 3.

Children—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3569.C56 A79 2000

813'.54—dc21

00-009411

ISBN 0-940322-49-8

Cover painting: *Gloria's Remains* (detail) by Darragh Park

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book designed by Red Canoe, Deer Lodge, Tennessee

Caroline Kavanagh, Deb Koch

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

October 2001

www.nybooks.com

For Arthur Gold

I N T R O D U C T I O N

ALTHOUGH JAMES SCHUYLER'S reputation rests chiefly on his poetry, his first book was the present novel, published in 1958. He was then all but unknown as a poet, despite a few poems published in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, and *Accent*. Reviewers, coming upon his name for the first time, didn't know quite what to make of *Alfred and Guinevere*. Nor had the publisher, Harcourt Brace, helped by commissioning quite superfluous line-drawing illustrations, which caused *The New York Times Book Review* to classify it as a children's book. Only Schuyler's friend Kenneth Koch was able to make the connection between the novel and the poetry (and poetic prose) which preceded and followed it. His review in *Poetry* treated *Alfred and Guinevere* as a further expression of the voice we find in

the poems, which is always both nostalgic and ironic, but still tinged with humbleness before nature and the many-colored minutiae of daily life. Schuyler's humorous and playful side would later enliven the novels *A Nest of Ninnies* (on which he and I collaborated) and *What's for Dinner?* His darker nature would surface in the poetry, especially in the magnificent long poems "The Morning of the Poem" and "A Few Days," and also in many shorter lyrics, though even there the somber subtext is often undercut by Schuyler's particular brand of mordant wit, which sustained him throughout periods of mental illness and emotional withdrawal.

James's life seemed destined from the start to be a troubled one. He was born in Chicago, on November 9, 1923. His early childhood was happy, but when he was six his parents separated and three years later his mother married a man whom her son would come to loathe. The father, Marcus Schuyler, had been a journalist for *The Washington Post*; James would later describe him as "an enchantingly wonderful man, a heavy, jolly, well-read man [terms which could be just as well applied to the son during the happier periods of his life]. Unfortunately he was a compulsive gambler, which my mother found hard to take." After Marcus and Daisy Schuyler separated, Daisy's mother, Ella Connor, came to live with her daughter and grandson. She taught James the names of flowers and birds, and delighted in taking him on visits to museums, such as the Freer Gallery, the Corcoran, and the

Smithsonian. James probably used her as a model for *Alfred and Guinevere's* Granny Miller, though that character's irritating characteristics sound more like his descriptions of his mother.

Daisy married Fredric Berton Ridenour, a building contractor, in 1931, and the family moved to the town of East Aurora, New York, near Buffalo. The town had been made famous by the pop philosopher Elbert Hubbard ("A Message to Garcia") and his arts and crafts colony, Roycroft. The couple had a son, Fredric Jr., in 1933. James's frequent disputes with his stepfather (who disapproved of his stepson's love of reading, and confiscated his library card, though James managed to get it back) contributed to the misery of growing up sensitive (and gay) in a small town. The glamorous autobiography *Guinevere* fantasizes may well be an echo of James's determination to escape the confines of home, while her sudden (and unexplained) remark to Alfred, "I'm sorry Daddy hit you"—one of several allusions to violence in the novel—casts a shadow over the pastel-hued accounts of children's pastimes and conversations.

James briefly attended Bethany College in West Virginia (where he got mostly bad grades except for a course in Victorian literature), enlisted in the Navy in World War II and got discharged for going AWOL, and made his way to New York, where he found a job doing clerical work at NBC. He was befriended by Chester Kallman and his lover W. H. Auden (he would later type the manuscript of

Auden's book *Nones* for him), and for a while lived with them in a building on Lexington Avenue near 27th Street. Using a small inheritance, he traveled to Italy and spent about a year and a half there, partly at Auden's home on Ischia. He met a number of Auden's artist and writer friends, including Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Rosamond Lehmann, William Walton, and John Richardson.

It was a promising milieu for a promising young writer. But after returning to New York Schuyler suffered the first of what was to be a series of mental breakdowns, and was hospitalized at the Bloomingdale Sanitarium in White Plains, where he would be confined again some twenty years later. This was, I believe, in 1950. He and I met the following year through John Bernard Myers, an art dealer and a friend of Auden's, who also introduced him to Frank O'Hara and the dance critic Edwin Denby, with whom he had an affair. Denby in turn introduced him to Arthur Gold, of the two-piano team Gold and Fizdale. Much to Denby's chagrin, Schuyler and Gold embarked on a love affair which was to last about five years. (One result of their relationship was Paul Bowles's "Picnic Cantata," set to a text by Schuyler, for which Gold and Fizdale arranged a commission.)

In about 1952 Schuyler moved in with the two pianists, who were sharing a romantic Victorian house overlooking the Hudson in the pleasant village of Snedens Landing, close to New York but somehow insulated (as it

is today) from the surrounding suburban sprawl. It was there that he began writing *Alfred and Guinevere*. Until then he had written only poetry and a few prose tales such as "The Home Book" and "The Infant Jesus of Prague," in a vivid but discordant style influenced by Surrealism and perhaps by some of Auden's early, atypically surreal prose. In "The Home Book" Schuyler bitterly evokes a variety of *Kinderszenen*, but in *Alfred and Guinevere* he writes about the past with tenderness and humor, influenced by Ronald Firbank, E. F. Benson's "Lucia" novels and George Grossmith's comic masterpiece, *The Diary of a Nobody*. The result is a timelessly idyllic comedy of manners, whose English models are inflected by 1930s small-town life in America, as seen through the gauze filters of the movies and children's literature. (James had a special fondness for the Nancy Drew books, where character delineation is supplanted by descriptions of the heroine's clothes; he was especially amused by their endpapers, showing the girl detective sleuthing by moonlight with the help of a magnifying glass.)

But there is more to Alfred and Guinevere's lives than dress-ups and storytelling, as the "Daddy hit you" passage suggests. In a letter to Dan Wickenden, his editor at Harcourt Brace, Schuyler gave some clues to his intentions for the novel:

Now what has happened (in the story) is that two white middle-class children had their first direct

experience of death: a dead Negro in a park (Rock Creek Park, to be precise) [the incident is alluded to on pages 6–7 of the novel]. There is a black thread that goes through the book, but that is a fear (an animal fear, one might say) of death, and not necessarily xenophobia [by which he apparently meant racism]. “I like Lily but I don’t love her”: Alfred, chapter one . . . Alfred in the simplest sense does love Lily. He is also very aware of how the “grown-ups” respond to stimuli. At any rate, because of that, I’m trying to make the last chapter (it’s well under way) a big relief like a faux [*sic*] d’artifice.

Schuyler was very aware then of the tensions, racial and other, that he had planted so far beneath the novel’s benign surface. But his letter also leaves much unclear. Was the incident of the dead man in the park something that he, as well as his juvenile characters, had experienced? Rock Creek Park is in Washington; neither place is mentioned in the novel, nor is the name of the city where the Gates family lives, but Schuyler had spent part of his childhood in Washington. The issue of Lily’s race also bothered him: elsewhere in the letter he worries that the name Lily might suggest a “colored” maid, and says that he is afraid of offending his black friends; nevertheless he keeps the name and avoids mention of her race. Lily at first seems the affectionate, cookie-baking black caregiver of white mythology, though toward the end she

is said to be complaining to Mrs. Gates about not getting paid (one of several hints that the family is struggling financially).

In the final chapter, the “dead colored man” (one is at first inclined to read it as “dead-colored man”) is discussed in greater and more disturbing detail. The children are on board a ship, talking to a Mrs. Perlmaster:

“Most likely,” Mrs. Perlmaster said, “he was drunk.”

“He was stone cold as a fish.”

“Don’t pretend you touched him,” Guinevere said. “That’s gilding the lily. He was dead, though, you could tell from looking at him and the way the men acted. I used to dream about him almost every night. Isn’t that funny? The first time was the night Alfred had his attack . . .

“I got appendicitis the same day I saw him. It will probably always be the day the most things happened to me.”

This, in the chapter Schuyler meant as “a big relief,” is as close to a catharsis as anything in the fragile weft of the novel.

Indeed, the plot is insistently ambiguous, lacking in resolution, while Lily and the other “grownups” are barely characters, barely anything but names. At the beginning, eight-year-old (more or less) Alfred is recovering from appendicitis in a hospital; he is visited by his

slightly older sister Guinevere and their Granny, who tells them that they will be coming to live with her and their Uncle Saul in the town of Fairview. Their father has gone to New York to be interviewed for a job in Europe, followed by their mother who will apparently not be accompanying him further. The children's stay is to be a long one, since the family home has been sublet. At Fairview Guinevere is befriended, somewhat, by "stuck-up" Betty and the even more obnoxious Lois, and Alfred makes friends with young Stanley. After a time their mother joins them, but the "absent father" remains absent and the parents might be contemplating divorce—at least, that is the impression one gets from Guinevere's admittedly one-sided diary.

Guinevere precipitates a crisis by confiding her suspicions to Betty, who publicly calls her "daughter of divorce," after which Guinevere punishes her by causing her to slip on ice (though that is Guinevere's laundered version of events). The gossip gets circulated by grownups and Mother stops speaking to Guinevere. At the end the children, Mother, and (for some reason) laconic Uncle Saul are on a liner bound for France, the father having relocated to Paris. We take our leave of them in mid-ocean, and Alfred's last snippet of bedtime repartee with Guinevere is the familiar childhood conjuration (a sort of verbal missile shield): "I'm rubber and you're glue so anything you say to me will bounce off of me and stick to you. Good night."—which brings the family's saga full circle.

Schuyler's later fictions—the two novels mentioned previously and the short story "Current Events" (a wonderful parody of high school journalism which chronicles a class outing to the state capitol)—are more substantially furnished with novelistic particulars than *Alfred and Guinevere*. The latter, however, is a deftly dashed off sketch from the hand of a master. In all these books Schuyler is mainly concerned with language used as a precision tool to further the ends of poetry. As Kenneth Koch wrote in his review of the novel for *Poetry*, "It is NOT, not at all, 'poetic prose'—any more than is Jane Austen's. It is, rather, prose as poetry really should be: among other things fresh, surprising, artful, and clear, and with a great deal of its joy and shock arising from language." Schuyler's art is a kind of localized, domestic magic, and all the more effective for being so. It is good to have this book, a talisman for many who know it, available once again.

—JOHN ASHBERY