

# 安·贝蒂短篇小说集

[美] 安·贝蒂 著  
丁文 黄晓铭 注释

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**The BURNING HOUSE**

by Ann Beattie

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八十年代美国名家中短篇小说丛书(之六)

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## 出版前言

近些年来,我们经常接触到一些读者,有大学英语本科生、研究生,有翻译工作者,也有英语文学爱好者,他们不约而同地提到,想多看一些最新的英文原著,但遗憾的是这类书不多,能找到的也大多年代较早,要想看看近年出的文学原作可谓难上加难。为此我公司才决定出版这套丛书。

这套丛书包括六个短篇小说集和一个中篇,作者分别是:索尔·贝娄、约翰·奇弗、约翰·厄普代克、雷蒙德·卡弗、唐纳德·巴塞尔姆、安·贝蒂和威廉·肯尼迪。这些作家有的是久负盛名的文学大家,有的则是八十年代崛起的说部新秀;其中包括诺贝尔文学奖以及美国普利策奖和全国图书奖的得主。他们的这些集子大多曾是美国的畅销书,有的被权威性报刊评为八十年代的十部佳作之一。

我们这套丛书主要收入八十年代依然活跃文坛的名家的短篇小说集,在此之前的作家的同类作品不在此列。有些作家虽在美国文坛卓有声望,但我们未能找到他们在八十年代出版的短篇集,只能付之阙如。

丛书中有六本是八十年代第一次出版,唯有《奇弗短篇小说集》例外。这本作家自选集于1978年第一次出版精装本,出版之后即成为美国罕见的短篇小说畅销书,并一举获得美国两项文学大奖——普利策奖和全国图书奖。此书至1988年已是第九次印刷。鉴于约翰·奇弗在美国文坛的地位以及在中国文学界的影响,本集又是他生前最后一部短篇集,我们仍将它收入丛书(依据美国兰登书屋下属的巴兰坦出版社1980年3月的版本)。此外还有一点需要说明,这套丛书中的集子原书部头太大,一时不能全出,目前先选了八十年代或靠近八十年代的作品。

我们在编辑这套丛书时,注意兼顾到作品的文学代表性,尽可能选择不同流派的、风格相异的作家和作品,以使读者不仅对每位作家的风格有深刻的印象,还可由此对当今美国文坛有比较广泛的了解。

本丛书的注释以大学英语本科高年级学生和具有同等水平的英语文学爱好者为对象,力求少而精,只就一些较难理解的方言俚语、独特的背景知识以及疑难句子作注。

我们这套丛书为读者提供了一个阅读最新英文佳作的机会,这是读者盼望已久且不可多得的机会,若读者能够珍惜它,在品味和欣赏文学原著的过程中提高英文阅读能力和文字水平,同时加深对美国的文学和社会现状的了解,我们将感到莫大的欣慰。

在这里,我们要感谢参加这套丛书注释工作的外交学院和厦门大学的教授、副教授们的鼎力相助。此外,由于我们水平有限,在丛书的选编方面难免有不足之处,还望读者多多指教。

## 安·贝蒂和她的小说

八十年代以来,美国文坛涌现了一批引人注目的女作家。她们在作品里从不同的侧面反映了美国的社会生活,受到读者的赞赏。她们中有我国读者比较熟悉的黑人女作家托尼·莫里森、艾丽丝·沃克和丹尼尔·斯蒂尔等。安·贝蒂是个后起之秀。她的小说在我国介绍还不多,但她的声望在美国与日俱增,有的报刊甚至称她是“真正的文学天才”。

安·贝蒂 1947 年诞生于美国首都华盛顿。二十九岁时便开始她的创作生涯。1976 年发表了第一部长篇小说《冬天凄凉的景象》,获得了意外的成功。小说描写六十年代一个二十多岁的美国青年对爱情的追求和挫折,以及由此而产生的孤独和迷惑的情绪。1980 年,她的第二部小说《就位》问世,又受到读者的青睐。作者在书中描绘了一个四十岁的广告商没有爱情的婚姻,展示了七十年代后期美国社会畸形发展所带来的家庭的解体。

由于上述两部小说的成功,安·贝蒂如异军突起,成了美国文坛的一颗新星。她善于以简洁平易的风格,揭示现代生活的差异及其对朋友之间、亲属之间和夫妻之间的影响。

安·贝蒂也擅长写短篇小说。从 1976 年至 1982 年,她先后出版了三部短篇小说集:《曲解》(1976)、《惊奇的秘密》(1978)和《燃烧的房子》(1982)。其中,《燃烧的房子》最受欢迎。它揭示了美国中青年在现实的爱情和婚姻生活中或他们梦幻的世界里的内心感受。同时它也反映了作者敏锐而深刻的洞察力和独具一格的有条不紊的散文风格,从而提高了她的小说家的声誉。《华盛顿邮报》称她为“新一代唯一的文学名家”。

《燃烧的房子》收集了十六篇短篇小说,从内容上来看,大体可分

为三类：对爱情的追求和追求中的苦与乐，日常的家庭生活以及太空时代的婚姻危机等。安·贝蒂以优美而朴实的文笔描绘了美国男男女女的感情生活，尤其是二十多岁至三十岁出头这段年华的追求和困惑，他们从天真地渴望爱情到恋爱中的瓜葛而陷入难以解决的感情危机之中。

安·贝蒂在《燃烧的房子》小说集中，首先注意探索爱情真假的问题。这成了书中好几篇的主题。爱情是年轻人一生的大事。可以说，在日常生活中男女青年总离不开爱情。但是，爱情有真有假，如果遇上真情的人，的确很幸运，碰到假意的人，则只好自认倒霉。作者在《学恋》中歌颂了真挚的感情。罗茨是个独身女人，可她有个男孩叫安德鲁。她常要求故事中的“我”带小孩去纽约，以便她能跟情人相会。“我”真诚关照小孩，几年以后小孩很喜欢“我”，使“我”回忆起学生时代与“罗茨”的一段真情，罗茨后来心里也明白了。《少女之谈》则描写了两个女人的婚姻经历和体验。巴巴拉跟她的第四个丈夫度过了六十寿辰。她向她的女婿介绍她青年时代未婚先孕，后来与情人分道扬镳的情况。她谈了自己对不可靠的婚姻的感受。她觉得结不结婚倒不要紧，关键是要懂得生活的涵义。在《放音》中，简和何莉是好朋友，两人像亲姐妹。她们都认为“男人决不是我们的救星”。简从自己的遭遇中记取了教训，但何莉却因以往的婚姻不美满而陷入苦恼不能自拔。作者在《阳光与阴影》一篇中则描写了杰克如何从恋爱的失败中学会珍惜爱情。他离开了旧恋人，与劳拉同居。他从现实中懂得应该爱惜自己的感情和劳拉的感情，不要互相伤害彼此宝贵的情感。

诚然，现实生活并不是如花似锦的。社会的变态容易令人失望，甚至使人误入歧途，或过早地告别人生。《篝火》描绘了一群青年朋友相聚在一起，哀悼一位早逝的朋友。他们回忆了过去的友情和经历，谈论眼前的困境：有的爱上吸毒者，有的则碰到中年精神危机……他们对未来感到惶惑。

真诚的相爱必然导致家庭的建立。幸福的家庭要以真挚的感情为基础，否则就容易貌合神离，最后走向解体。《1978年冬天》以一个局外人尼克的眼光叙述了一家人的聚会。老大去世了，其他人都回家

来,尼克也回来了,但昔日的情意已渐消失。短短几天的相处,尼克感到家庭关系变得复杂了,偌大房子的气氛跟冬天的屋外一样冷。

但是,过于安逸的生活往往令人感到空虚。在《幸福》一篇中,女主人公“我”有个忠诚的丈夫和舒适的生活环境,但她感到自己的生活并不幸福,因为她快三十岁了,终日无所事事,颇为焦虑不安。

太空时代给人们带来了现代化的家用电器,也给家庭的观念蒙上了阴影。美国许多家庭出现了婚姻危机。《灰姑娘华尔兹舞》描写丈夫离开妻子去跟另一个男人同居的变态婚姻。这种同性恋是社会变态的缩影。《希望》刻画了一个男孩在父母离异后,既不愿同父亲生活,也不肯跟母亲同住,而希望和她的异父姐姐一起过日子。婚姻的破裂往往给小孩的心灵造成极大的创伤。《飘流》和《重复的梦》也反映了类似的主题,这是颇发人深思的。

《像玻璃》进一步揭示了太空时代的婚姻像玻璃一样容易破碎。它描写了一个离了婚的女人和她女儿的生活遭遇。作者再次通过这个故事说明婚姻的不可靠性。“一个人如果不能控制自己的生活,就会被生活所束缚”。《格林威治时间》则写了一个离了婚的男人千方百计想从他前妻手中把儿子要回来。《燃烧的房子》细致地展现了一对恩爱男女的婚姻如何在太空时代逐渐破裂。

尽管这个短篇集中所描写的大都是人们耳闻目睹的日常生活,但它仍然非常吸引人。这不仅因为作者善于提出人们生活中最关心的问题,而且在于她善于以清新平易的文字来表现主题。

家庭是社会的基本单位。婚姻是人们的终身大事。科学技术的飞速发展给社会带来了新的变化。这种变化深深地影响了人们的价值观念和生活准则。安·贝蒂善于捕捉这种影响在美国中青年心灵上的投影,并且巧妙地加以描绘,因而引起了读者的兴趣和关注。

诚然,如果将安·贝蒂的小说和丹尼尔·斯蒂尔的小说如《爹》和《明星梦》等相比,就不难发现:安·贝蒂小说的思想倾向比较含蓄,有时显得不太明朗,不像斯蒂尔那样讴歌一些在家庭破裂后顽强生活下去,甚至乐于为别人做好事的人物,也不像艾丽丝·沃克那样在《紫色》中赞美备受丈夫虐待而发愤图强,终于获得人们的敬佩和

丈夫的尊重的女主人公茜莉。安·贝蒂真实地揭示了现实社会的变态及其给婚姻家庭生活造成的矛盾,对我们具有一定的认识作用。但是,我们也感到,安·贝蒂的短篇小说似乎缺乏一种生活的力量。

不过,从技巧上来说,安·贝蒂的短篇小说还是很有特色的。大部分短篇都采用第一人称的叙事手法,令人感到真实可信。作者的描写非常细腻,准确地表露了离婚男女的心态。尤其是对离了婚的女人的内心反应,作者刻划得维妙维肖,丝丝入扣,把她们的疑虑、不安、苦恼和气愤写得层次分明,跃然纸上。作者所描绘的人物,大都来自上层或中产阶级,经济充裕,生活舒适,他们所碰到的不是经济问题,而是感情危机。这正是当今美国社会一个带有普遍性的问题。尽管如此,作者并不采用意识流手法来表现人物内心的矛盾,而是运用许多真实的细节来体现。小说的语言通俗易懂、生动流畅,富有表现力。安·贝蒂笔下的人物面临困难的抉择时往往比较理智,仿佛作者在劝导人们:亲密地结合,友好地分手。这也许是对待婚姻破裂的正确态度。因此,这些人物的遭遇往往令人同情,读者并不苛求他们,还可从中得到某种启迪。

杨仁敬

1991年3月



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# LEARNING TO FALL

RUTH'S HOUSE, EARLY MORNING: A BOWL OF APPLES ON THE kitchen table, crumbs on the checkered tablecloth. "I love you," she says to Andrew. "Did you guess that I loved you?" "I know it," he says. He's annoyed that his mother is being mushy in front of me. He is eager to seem independent, and cranky because he just woke up. I'm cranky, too, even after the drive to Ruth's in the cold. I'm drinking coffee to wake up. If someone said that he loved me at this moment, I'd never believe him; I can't think straight so early in the morning, hate to make conversation, am angry at the long, cold winter. Andrew and I are both frowning at Ruth's table and she—as always—is tolerating us. "More coffee?" Ruth asks me. I nod yes, and let her pour it, although I could easily get up and walk to the stove for the pot. "What about brushing your hair?" she says to Andrew. He gets up and leaves the room, comes back with her wooden brush and begins to brush his hair. "Not over the table, please," she says. He has finished. He puts the brush on the table and looks at me. "We're going to miss the train," he

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says. "There's plenty of time," Ruth says. Andrew looks at the clock and sighs loudly. Ruth laughs. She rubs her finger around the top of the open honey jar and sucks it. "Come on," I say to Andrew. "You're right. I'd rather be early than late." 5 I ask Ruth: "Anything from the city?" If she did want something, she wouldn't say—she hates to take things, because she has no money to buy things in return. Nor does she want many things around: the kitchen has only a table and four chairs. What furniture she has came with the house. "No, thanks," 10 she says, and turns off the radio. She says again, as we go out the door, "Thanks." She has a hand on each of our backs as I open the door and cold floods into the house.

Once or twice a month, on Wednesdays, Andrew and I take 15 the train from Connecticut to New York, and I walk down the streets and into stores and through museums with him, holding his little hand, which is as tight as a knot. He does not have friends his own age, but he likes me. After eight years, he trusts me.

20 Today he is wearing his blue jeans with the Superman patch on the knee. If Superman launched himself from Andrew's knee, he would be flying a foot or so off the ground. People would think that small figure in blue was a piece of trash caught by the wind, a stick blowing, something to gather their hem against. 25 against.

"I'm hungry again," he says.

Andrew knows that I don't eat during the day. He says *again* because he has already had oatmeal at home and a pastry at the fast-food shop across from the train in Westport at ten 30 o'clock, and now it's only twelve—too early to eat another meal—and he knows I'm going to say: "*Again?*"

Andrew. The morning before the night he was born, Ruth and I swam in Hall's Pond. She loved it that she could float, heavy as she was, about to deliver. She loved being pregnant 35 and wanted the child, although the man who was the father begged her to have an abortion and finally left her six months before Andrew was born. On the last day that we swam in Hall's Pond, she was two weeks overdue. There wasn't a sign

of the pain yet, but her tension made me as dizzy as the hot sun on my head as I stood in the too-cold water.

And that night: holding her hand, my hand finally moving up her arm, as if she were slipping away from me. "Take my hand," she kept saying, and I would rub my thumb on her knuckles, squeeze her hand as hard as I dared, but I couldn't stop myself from grasping her wrist, the middle of her arm, hanging on to her elbow, as if she were drowning. It was the same thing I would do with the man who became my lover, years later—but then it would be because I was sinking.

Andrew and I are walking downhill in the Guggenheim Museum, and I am thinking about Ray. Neither of us is looking at the paintings. What Andrew likes about the museum is the view, looking down into the pool of blue water speckled with money.

I stand beside him on the curving walkway. "Don't throw coins from up here, Andrew," I say. "You might hurt somebody."

"Just a penny," he says. He holds it up to show me. A penny: no tricks.

"You're not allowed. It could hit somebody in the face. You could hurt somebody, throwing it."

I am asking him to be careful of hurting people. When he would not be born, an impatient doctor used forceps and tugged him out, and there was slight brain damage. That and some small paralysis of his face, at the mouth.

He pockets the penny. His parka has fallen off one shoulder. He doesn't notice.

"We'll get lunch," I say. "Take your pennies and throw them in the pool when we get down there."

He gets there before me. I look down and see him making his wishes. I doubt that he knows yet what to wish for. Other people are throwing money. Andrew is shy and just stands there, eyes closed and squinting, holding his pennies. He likes to do things in private. You can see the disappointment on his face that other people are in the world. He likes to run with his arms out like the wings of a plane; he likes to be in the

first seat in the train compartment—to sit with only me where three seats face two seats across from them. He likes to stretch his legs. He hates cigarette smoke, and the smell of perfume. In spring, he sniffs the breeze like an old man sniffing cognac. He is in the third grade at the elementary school, and so far he has had only slight trouble keeping up. His teacher—who has become Ruth's friend—is young and hopeful, and she doesn't criticize Ruth for the notes she writes pretending that Andrew has been ill on the day the two of us were really in New York. Andrew makes going to the city fun, and for that—and because I know him so well, and I pity him—I almost love him.

We go to his favorite place for hamburgers—a tiny shop on Madison Avenue with a couple of tables in the front. The only time we sat at a table was the time that Ray met us there. Andrew liked sitting at a table, but he was shy and wouldn't say much because Ray was there. The man behind the counter knows us. I know that he recognizes us, even though he doesn't say hello. We always order the same thing: I have black coffee (advertised as the world's best); Andrew has a bacon cheeseburger and a glass of milk. Because Ruth has taught him to make sure he looks neat, he wipes the halo of milk off his mouth after every sip. His hands get sticky from the milk-wet napkin.

Today it is bitter cold, and I am remembering that hot and distant summer. I have hardly been swimming in eight years—not since Arthur and I moved downstate, away from Hall's Pond. When we were in graduate school together, Ruth and I would go there to study. She would have her big, thick Russian novels with her, and I was always afraid she would drop one into the water. Such big books, underlined, full of notes, it would have seemed more than an average tragedy if she had lost one. She never did. I lost a gold chain (a real one), and my lighter. One time my grocery list fell out of my book into the water and I saw the letters bleed and haze and disappear as it went under.

We went there earlier in the day than other people—not that many people knew about Hall's Pond then—so we always

got to sit on the big rock. Later in the day, people would come and sit on the smaller rock, or stand around on the pier going out to the water. Some of the people swam naked. One time a golden retriever jumped onto our rock, crouched, and threw its head back and howled at the sky, then ran away through the woods, its feet blackening in the wet dirt by the water's edge. Ruth was freaked out by it. She wrote a poem, and in the poem the dog came to give a warning. Not an angel, a dog. I stared at the poem, not quite understanding it. "It's meant to be funny," she said. When the dog ran off, Ruth had put her hands over her mouth. The next summer, when I married Arthur, she wrote a poem about the bouquet I carried. The bouquet had some closed lilies, and in the poem she said they were like candles—as big as Roman candles to her eye, as if my bunch of flowers were going to explode and shower down. I laughed at the poem. It was the wrong reaction. Now, because things have come apart between Arthur and me, it has turned out to be prophetic.

"What's up now?" Andrew says, laying down the cheeseburger. He always eats them the same way, and it is a way I have never seen another child eat one: he bites around the outside, eating until only the circle at the center is left.

I look at my watch. The watch was a Christmas present from Arthur. It's almost touching that he isn't embarrassed to give me such impersonal presents as eggcups and digital watches. To see the time, you have to push in the tiny button on the side. As long as you hold it, the time stays lit, changes. Take away your hand and the watch turns clear red again.

"We're going to Bonnie's studio. She's printed the pictures Ruth wanted. Those pictures she took the Fourth of July—we're finally going to see them."

I feel in my pocket for the check Ruth gave me to pay Bonnie.

"But where are we going?" he says.

"To Spring Street. You remember your mother's friend with the long hair to her waist, don't you? You know where Bonnie lives. You've been there before."

We take the subway, and Andrew sits in the crowded car

by squeezing himself onto the seat next to me and sitting on one hip, his left leg thrown over mine so that we must look like a ventriloquist and a dummy. The black woman sitting next to him shifts over a little. He stays squeezed against me.

5 "If Bonaie offers you lunch, I bet you take it," I say, poking the side of his parka.

"I couldn't eat any more."

"You?" I say.

10 "String bean," he says to me. He pats his puffy parka. Underneath it, you would be able to see his ribs through the T-shirt. He is lean and would be quite handsome except for the obvious defect of his mouth, which droops at one corner as if he's sneering.

15 We are riding on the subway, and Ruth is back at the tiny converted carriage house she rents from a surgeon and his wife in Westport. Like everything else in the area, it is overpriced, and she can barely afford it—her little house with not enough light, with plastic taped over the aluminum screens and the screens left in the windows because there are no storm win-  
20 dows. Wood is burning in the stove, and herbs are clumped in a bag of gauze hung in the pot of chicken stock. She is underlining things in books, cutting coupons out of newspapers. On Wednesdays she does not have to go to work at the community college where she teaches. She is waiting for her lover,  
25 Brandon, to call or to come over: there's warmth, soup, discoveries about literature, and, if he cares, privacy. I envy him an afternoon with Ruth, because she will cook for him and make him laugh and ask nothing from him. She earns hardly any money at the community college, but her half-gallons of  
30 wine taste better than the expensive bottles Arthur's business friends uncork. She will reach out and touch you to let you know she is listening when you talk, instead of suggesting that you go out to see some movie for amusement.

35 Almost every time when I take Andrew home Brandon is there. It's rare that he goes there any other day of the week. Sometimes he brings two steaks. On Valentine's Day he brought her a plant that grows well in the dim light of the kitchen. It sits on the window sill behind the sink and is weaving upward,

guided by tacks Ruth has pushed into the window frame. The leaves are thick and small, green and heart-shaped. If I were a poet, those green leaves would be envy, closing her in. Like many people, he does envy her. He would like to be her, but he does not want to take her on. Or Andrew.

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The entryway to Bonnie's loft is so narrow, painted bile-green, peeling and filthy, that I always nearly panic, thinking I'll never get to the top. I expect roaches to lose their grip on the ceiling and fall on me; I expect a rat to dart out. I run, silently, ahead of Andrew.

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Bonnie opens the door wearing a pair of paint-smeared jeans, one of Hal's V-neck sweaters hanging low over her hips. Her loft is painted the pale yellow of the sun through fog. Her photographs are tacked to the walls, her paintings hung. She hugs both of us and wants us to stay. I take off my coat and unzip Andrew's parka and lay it across his legs. The arms stick out from the sides, no hands coming through them. It could be worse; Andrew could have been born without hands or arms. "I'll tell you what I'm sick of," Ruth said to me not long after he was born, one of the few times she ever complained. "I'm sick of hearing how things might have been worse, when they might also have been better. I'm sick of lawyers saying to wait—not to settle until we're sure how much damage has been done. They talk about damage with their vague regret, the way the weatherman talks about another three inches of snow. I'm sick of wind whistling through the house, when it could be warm and dry." She is never sick of Brandon, and the two steaks he brings, although he couldn't come to dinner the night of Andrew's birthday, and she is not bitter that Andrew's father has had no contact with her since before the birth. "Angry?" Ruth said to me once. "I'm angry at myself. I don't often misjudge people that way."

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Bonnie fixes Andrew hot chocolate. My hands are about to shake, but I take another cup of coffee anyway, thinking that it might just be because the space heater radiates so little heat in the loft. Andrew and I sit close together, the white sofa spreading away on either side of us. Andrew looks at some of

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Ruth's photographs, but his attention drifts away and he starts to hum. I fit them back in the Manila envelope, between the pieces of cardboard, and tie the envelope closed. He rests his head on my arm, so that it's hard to wind the string to close the envelope. While his eyes are closed, Bonnie whispers to me: "I couldn't. I couldn't take money from her."

She looks at me as if I'm crazy. Now it's my problem: how am I going to give Ruth the check back without offending her? I fold the check and put it in my pocket.

"You'll think of something," Bonnie says softly.

She looks hopeful and sad. She is going to have a baby, too. She knows already that she is going to have a girl. She knows that she is going to name her Ora. What she doesn't know is that Hal gambled and lost a lot of money and is worried about how they will afford a baby. Ruth knows that, because Hal called and confided in her. Is it modesty or self-preservation that makes Ruth pretend that she is not as important to people as she is? He calls, she told me, just because he is one of the few people she has ever known who really enjoy talking on the telephone.

We take the subway uptown, back to Grand Central Station. It is starting to fill up with commuters: men with light, expensive raincoats and heavy briefcases, women carrying shopping bags. In another couple of hours Arthur will be in the station on his way home. The Manila envelope is clamped under my arm. Everyone is carrying something. I have the impulse to fold Andrew to me and raise him in my arms. I could do that until he was five, and then I couldn't do it any more. I settle for taking his hand, and we walk along swinging hands until I let go for a second to look at my watch. I look from my watch to the clock. They don't agree, and of course the clock is right, the watch is not. We have missed the 3:05. In an hour there is another train, but on that train it's going to be difficult to get a seat. Or, worse, someone is going to see that something beyond tiredness is wrong with Andrew, and we are going to be offered a seat, and he is going to know why. He suspects already, the way children of a certain age look a little guilty