The Aviators Short Guide

The Aviators by W. E. B. Griffin

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

John Oliver's character has much to do with the loyalty of his men. In Griffin, characters often seem expressly created to generate admiration, charm, perhaps a little raffishness, but seldom disdain or disgust. Griffin's major characters may often be drawn in one dimension, but those single dimensions still have considerable texture. General Bob Bellmon, for example, is a man whose first and foremost concern is for the Army and Duty. Yet Griffin takes us inside Bellmon's mind, and we watch him mull over the development as an officer and future leader of John Oliver. Oliver is somewhat more complex; Griffin gives him a love life as well as an Army life. His almost lovehate relationship with widow Eliza Wood shows him to be more than simply a youthful hell-raising flyboy. Liza Wood is an exception to David Murray's statement that [Griffin's] womenfolk are "so brave and cheerful that they make one's teeth ache." Liza is definitely not cheerful most of the time; while she loves John, she knows what the Army can do to him — kill him, as she feels it did her first husband — and the tension between these two characters is between two views of the Army — Army as home and Army as consumer of lives. That Liza follows John, in the end of the novel, to his new posting, may be indicative more of the Army's winning the struggle than it is of any victory of love over difficulty.

The characters are almost all, all at their roots, persons of decency, although some show it in different ways.

Craig Lowell, for example, exemplifies the typical Griffin hero. Born into a wealthy family, he nonetheless starts his military career as an enlisted man, working his way up to the rank of Colonel. His wealth is no help to his military career, but it is no hindrance, either. Bob Bellmon is, at the end of the series, a Major General, and, not surprisingly, is the son of a general and married to the daughter of a general.

With Griffin, privilege and ability are not separated. Sandy Felter is from a Jewish family which is surprised to see him enter West point; born out of privilege, Felter has risen to immense power in Army Intelligence.

Social Concerns

T he Aviators takes place during the Vietnam War — specifically, in 1963-1964. The great protests against the war have not become an issue to the characters (although they will in a later novel in the series). The characters in The Aviators, though, are untroubled by issues of right or wrong with respect to the war — rather, they act in terms of duty; there is little or no moralizing about America's place in Vietnam. Of more immediate concern for protagonist John Oliver are his relationship with his family on the one hand and with the woman he loves on the other. In addition, the social structure of the Army is held up for view; we are shown the workings of a major base, as well as the protocol and social matrix existing between junior and senior officers, reserve and regular officers, and officers and civilians. In most situations, John Oliver, while not a Buck Rogers hero, and those associated with him are shown as, generally, good characters, worthy of attention.

The social issues are seated in the relationships of civilians to Army personnel, the relationships between family members (often ruptured in this and in other Griffin books), and the relationships between officers and men in the service. Griffin pays particular attention to the interaction of senior and junior officers, with a particular example being the development of trust, respect, and acceptance between Major General Bob Bellmon and his aide, Captain John Oliver. Additionally, the considerable distrust between armed forces and even within them, exemplified in the struggle between the Air Force and Army for control of battlefield aircraft and the attitude of mainline Army personnel toward the "snake-eaters" (U.S. Army Special Forces, or Green Berets), is shown. The Army is a complex world unto itself, its own society, self-generated and selfcontained. That this society is not always perfect is shown through the relationships between soldier and civilian, such as the relationships between John Oliver and Liza Wood, and Oliver and his sister, who tries to cheat him of much of the proceeds of the truck stop he inherited from his deceased parents.

Techniques

Griffin's dominant technique is description — often description of seemingly unimportant things, but things which eventually become very significant in the larger context of the novel' s structure. According to David Murray, "What saves the book — and the series — from mediocrity is a generous ration of detailed and fascinating descriptions of weapons, tactics ... Army life and battle." In The Aviators, readers learn more about rotary wing aircraft (helicopters) than they would in a lifetime of otherwise casual reading. Griffin tells the reader how helicopters work — and, in one poignant chapter, what happens when they do not work — and in the process explains more about the men who fly them and the reasons they exist in the Army milieu than could be done in a more direct narration. Therein lies the mastery of Griffin's technique — its indirectness. Griffin examines the personalities and interaction so indirectly that readers learn more about the character than they realize.

Griffin's prose style is also best described in terms of its dialogue. Although Griffin's characters concern themselves with the mundane, their dialog reveals much about their character. With some exceptions, Griffin's prose is not battle prose. This is not to say it is not warlike prose — the characters — by and large, male characters — are certainly warriors — but it is not prose that primarily details the shots, strife, and drama of battles. With Griffin, the drama is within the character rather than the battlefield.

Themes

Themes in Aviators, as in the rest of the Brotherhood of War series, often cross novels and series. Perhaps Griffin's major theme is loyalty and esprit de corps — in a military or (as in the Badge of Honor series) police setting. In The Aviators, the men who fly the Army's aircraft are a tightly knit group, aware of any interference or attack, be it from a traditional enemy (in this case, the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese) or an "internal" enemy (the Air Force, in an attempt to restrict the Army's aviation inventory and abilities). That the fraternity — and in Griffin this is seldom an inappropriate term — of Army flyers is strong and close-knit is best exemplified at the beginning of the novel, at which point the reader sees the regard with which John Oliver's men hold him, even though he is very young for his rank and that rank is a step lower than that mandated for the aviation company Oliver commands.

Adaptations

Please see the biographical entry on Griffin for a list of books on tape.

Key Questions

It is probably not a new observation that Griffin's characters and situations are almost Alger-esque; characters find themselves placed into and saved from difficult situations with almost dizzying rapidity. Yet Griffin makes these characters deserve their rewards — and fates. At issue, then, is the believability of the novels, and whether they are meant to be believable, or more generally realistic. In this, the strong morality, singular character delineation, and adventurous plots work in dynamic tension with the realistic and detailed description surrounding them.

1. How realistic are the characters, in particular Liza Wood, Bob Bellmon, "Father" Lunsford, and Bobby Bellmon? Is their realism — or lack thereof — related to the amount of description that Griffin provides of them, or to something else about the way Griffin paints their characters?

2. How would you describe John Oliver's character? Is he a typical hotshot aviator, or is he different? How do we find out what kind of person he is — from Oliver or others?

3. What do you think about John Oliver's relationship with Liza Wood — especially the decidedly ambivalent beginning of their relationship? Do you empathize with her wanting him to leave the Army? Why does she return to him at the end of the book?

4. Consider the tension between Army Aviation and the Air Force, and "regular" officers and Green Berets.

What is the root of these antagonisms?

How are they resolved — or are they?

5. Compare The Aviators with other military fiction you might have read.

How is it similar? How different?

6. With the exception of the episode where Oliver's helicopter is shot down, there is no battle per se in the novel. Does this make the book more or less enjoyable to read? How?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

All of Griffin's books fit within a long tradition of twentieth-century military fiction; specifically, Griffin has precedents in writers such as C. S. Forester, author of the Horatio Hornblower series; Douglas Reeman, author of a number of British seafaring novels, most treating the Second World War; and Max Hennessy, author of trilogies about the British cavalry and the RAF.

In the work of all these authors, the protagonists are men who know themselves when put in positions of command. All these authors treat the relationships between the men in war. Perhaps most obviously, though, Griffin and the above-mentioned authors share a connection to the modern "technothrillers" of Tom Clancy, Dale Brown, Stephen Coonts, and others. All provide a look into the technique of war — not simply the workings of a nuclear submarine (or an eighteenth-century man-of-war, or an Army helicopter) but of the techniques of making war, the techniques of living as a warrior, and the interactions of warriors. Like these other authors, Griffin provides considerable detail regarding the arcana of war, be it uniforms, aircraft, protocol, attitudes, or history. Unlike Forester's Hornblower, however, Griffin' s characters are not long tormented by what they must do as soldiers; they do their jobs and move on.

Related Titles

The Aviators is part of the Brotherhood of War series, all novels: The Lieutenants, 1983; The Captains, 1983; The Majors, 1984; The Colonels, 1985; The Berets, 1985; The Generals, 1986; The New Breed, 1987. Each novel in the series stands independently as a story, but chronicles the adventures of the same general set of characters (with other characters entering and leaving in each novel), beginning with the introduction of Bob Bellmon in battle in 1942 and ending with Craig Lowell's retirement in the early 1970s.

Griffin's Men At War series, written under the pseudonym Alex Baldwin, is very closely related the Brotherhood of War and Corps series (in some bookstores, the Baldwin titles are placed with the better-known and better-selling Griffin titles). Although there are no characters or plot lines that bridge between the series, the familiar Griffin themes are there: the poor boy upon whom is bestowed glory, honor, and (usually) promotion to commissioned and therefore respectability in the larger world of the military; the noncommissioned officer who deserves better respect because he is wiser and more competent than the commissioned officers around him; the wealthy young man who, upon being given command, proves to be a natural leader.

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