Bearstone Short Guide

Bearstone by Will Hobbs

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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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Overview

Hobbs presents the story of a young man searching for and finding his identity in a world foreign to the tenets of his upbringing. As such it follows the pattern of most rite of passage novels: it contains the requisite portrait of the young male struggling against the confinement imposed on him by a narrow-minded society, his rejection of its standards, and his eventual development of a personal philosophy that increases his understanding of the world and his place in it. Along the way, he must also confront the idea (or the reality) of evil existing in the world, evaluate and invent his own belief system, and face a series of challenges or perform a number of tasks in order to gain the prize—self-confidence and validation.

Hobbs treats issues important to many young people—feelings of isolation, the struggle to discover what is good and what is evil in the world, the need for love and acceptance, the need to feel successful at something—and he also incorporates a strong focus on the conflicts that arise between varied cultures' beliefs. In this story the protagonist, Cloyd, is a fourteen-year-old Ute raised primarily by his grandmother after his mother dies in childbirth and his father deserts him. He spends his days roaming the hills, herding his grandmother's goats and developing a deep appreciation for nature, especially nature as it is viewed through traditional Native American eyes. However, because he skips school and does not respond satisfactorily to enforced educational and civilizing influences, he is deemed incorrigible by society and "sentenced" to spend time living under supervised conditions—in what the social worker calls a "group home."

Cloyd chafes even more under this regimen, and he ultimately runs away in search of his father. But instead of finding the father he believes will save him from the white people's lifestyle, Cloyd is eventually taken to live on a ranch with Walter—an elderly, white rancher—who has agreed to keep him for the summer in exchange for help with the chores. The character of Walter provides Hobbs with the opportunity to explore the contrasts and the similarities between youth and age, Indian and white man, dreams and responsibilities. The values brought out by Hobbs will prove recognizable to most young people and to many adults as well.

About the Author

Will Hobbs was born on August 22, 1947, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Since his father was an engineer in the Air Force, Will and his sister and three brothers moved frequently, giving Will the experience of growing up in the Panama Canal Zone, Alaska, Virginia, Texas, and California.

He credits much of his interest and expertise in the outdoors to scouting, which he says he became involved in because of his mother's influence—she herself was an Eagle Scout who once met Eleanor Roosevelt at an International Girl Scout Conference.

Will attended and graduated from Stanford University where he earned his B.A. and M.A. in English. After graduating, Will and his wife Jean moved to Colorado in 1972 where he taught secondary school from 1973 to 1989. They both love the outdoors and the natural settings that Will incorporates into his books. They have no children, but enjoy including their nieces and nephews on their wilderness adventure trips. In Bearstone the natural locales where Cloyd and Walter find themselves are based on the back country of the Weminuche Wilderness very close to the Hobbs's home just outside Durango. Will says that the places in this novel are real, and he visits them often.

Hobbs unashamedly admits to loving "romantic adventure," and he hopes to "inspire in [his] readers the affection" he feels for "wild places and the other creatures with whom we share the planet." His novels reflect his easy and comfortable relationship with the fragile strength and power of nature, and his awareness and respect for the strength and power of human nature as well. In all his books, Will sets a teenage protagonist in and against a natural setting, and readers experience the struggle, growth, and triumphs that result. As such, his books have proven to be popular, valuable portraits of young people emerging from pain and insecurity into self-awareness and confidence as they are tested by natural, and human, forces.

Setting

Cloyd is originally from Utah, but most of the story takes place in Colorado, specifically the hills and mountains surrounding Walter's ranch. The time is modern, but Walter lives a rugged, rural existence. Cloyd immediately feels freer at Walter's than he ever did at the group home. Although he runs away at first from his social worker and from Walter before he actually meets the leathery widower, he eventually finds himself liking and admiring the old man and wanting to please him. Although he works hard at ranch chores, Cloyd finds time to explore the hills surrounding the ranch.

In the hills he stumbles upon an ancient burial site. Finding a carved, turquoise bear left to protect the grave, he immediately adopts it as his personal symbol and totem. The bear stands him in good stead later when he goes off with Walter to reopen the old man's gold mine, abandoned years before.

The trip up into the wilder mountains tests Cloyd physically, morally, and emotionally, and provides the setting for the dramatic moment when Cloyd faces making a choice between saving a bear, which Cloyd feels attracted to as a sign of nature, manhood, and his traditions, and saving Walter, who has accepted him and encouraged him when few others would. The harsh beauty of Nature is revealed to Cloyd and the reader. Hobbs helps us confront both its vulnerability and its power.

Social Sensitivity

The issues of multiculturalism—the clash of different cultures, the possibility of discovering commonly held beliefs with those of another background, the difficulty of learning to value a set of beliefs not like our own—emerge naturally out of the story. He reveals his own reverence for the land, nature, and freedom as he sketches Cloyd's feelings.

Walter, although white, does not patronize or scorn Cloyd's traditions.

Indeed, he understands Cloyd to be operating out of normal, adolescent confusion as well as from a base of cultural ideals. Walter's acceptance of Cloyd and Cloyd's acceptance of Walter model a tolerant and respectful view of difference, whether that difference stems from race, age, or class distinctions.

Some readers or critics might frown at Cloyd's rebellious, even destructive, behavior. He does, at one point, use a chain saw on Walter's wife's grove of peach trees, destroying them to get back at what he sees as Walter's disloyalty. Yet, realistically, Cloyd's actions are clearly not presented as admirable or acceptable. Hobbs insures that no reader can mistake the fact that Cloyd pays for his lack of control by alienating the one living person who consistently offers him respect and dignity.

Cloyd's suffering is genuine, and he makes good for the vandalism before the story's end. The violent scenes are few and integral to the plot. Since no glorification of violence exists, it does not overwhelm the basic message of what the power of caring can accomplish. This point remains the most important controlling idea in the novel.

Literary Qualities

Hobbs writes a good plot. His story line is clear, interesting, and believable. His characters do lean toward the obvious stereotypes for their kind— Cloyd's stoicism, reluctance to conform, and determination do not suggest someone very different from many other Native American characters in literature and film. However, Hobbs saves Cloyd from being a stereotype with his revelation and growth by book's end. As the story concludes, Cloyd has grown far beyond his early, stolid presence.

Walter, too, grows some, although not as much as Cloyd. Walter is nicely drawn by Hobbs through many scenes where Hobbs adds a detail here and a bit of background there. Overall, Walter—although outlined as the typical kindly old man with an unrealized dream—displays enough range of emotion and action to make him, also, a round and well-developed character.

Hobbs employs several symbols throughout to good effect. The color blue figures prominently in his schema.

The carved bear statue with which Cloyd identifies strongly is turquoise; Cloyd's equine companion is named "Blue" to reflect his coloring, explained as "white hairs intermingled with gray underneath" to give the effect of a "blue tinge all over." Both animal and stone represent not just companions to Cloyd, but also they reflect aspects of his character. They especially illustrate the loner in Cloyd, evidenced by his adoption of the secret name, "Lone Bear," after he finds the stone, and his whispered promise to the horse that the two of them will "get to the mountains . . . Blueboy and Lone Bear."

Themes and Characters

Bearstone features just a few characters, and only two are really important: Cloyd and Walter. Susan, Cloyd's social worker/housemother, is the only female with any real involvement in Cloyd's life, especially since he is separated from his grandmother, but she is strictly a secondary character. Rusty, Walter's hunter/trapper friend, figures into some of the action, but he provides excuse and motivation for what Cloyd does rather than existing for his own sake. The blue roan horse, "Blue," given to Cloyd by Walter, becomes Cloyd's initial confidant. Boy and horse develop a relationship based on initially tentative respect, but their relationship strengthens until Blue deliberately suffers a nasty fall in order to protect Cloyd from more serious injury. This sacrifice on the part of the horse mirrors Cloyd's own response to Walter's injury later—despite the wariness with which Cloyd initially encountered this white rancher whose gold mine may have been partly responsible for the Utes' eviction from the mountain area, Cloyd suffers and absorbs an emotional blow in order to get help fast for Walter.

Thematically, Hobbs explores the common situation of the male bound to constricting ties imposed by society. As is evident in much of nineteenth-century literature (for example, Huckleberry Finn, Moby Dick, Thoreau's Walden), the myth suggests that civilization restricts and limits one's individual freedom and negates the possibility of achieving an elevated, spiritual communion with the purity in nature. The hero, almost always male, must escape the corrupting influences of society and establish himself (or more rarely, herself) in open, free, supposedly untainted territory. Only there can the nobility of the human spirit reach its potential.

Interestingly, the nineteenth-century authors found it convenient to portray society as having definite feminine qualities, and the wilderness as exhibiting male characteristics. In Bearstone Cloyd's flight is from the civilizing influences of the group home, represented by Susan. He flees to the wild, mountainous country of his people's traditions accompanied by Walter and Blue. When he reaches the climax of his journey which serves as the story's climax as well, Cloyd finds the depths of his inner strength in the natural setting of the mountains, and his discovery is fueled by the life, example, and death of a grizzly bear, the animal claimed by the Utes as the most important friend to their people. In society Cloyd could never feel strong and free, but out in nature, he blossoms.

Walter, too, is running from societal norms as represented by a woman. He was dissuaded years earlier from mining the gold strike he discovered as a young man. His wife Maude urged him to give up that wild and unpredictable life to settle down to ranching. He abandoned his "dream" for her, but now, since her death, he finds himself thinking more and more about returning to the site of his youthful dreams.

With Cloyd providing the impetus to take the trip into the wilderness, Walter leaves the civilizing influences of his ranch with its demands on his time and its need for order, structure, and routine, and he strikes out into nature to rediscover what he lost years earlier.

Both man and boy discover truths about themselves far from women and the conveniences of the city, thus playing out the traditional pattern of the retreat into nature.

However, to Hobbs's credit, he provides a look at both sides of the issue.

While both males find excitement and reward in nature, they also find that nature is much more unforgiving of error than they anticipated. Cloyd is lost in a blizzard, falls down a hillside, and watches a grizzly bear take a fatal bullet. He is helpless to control these incidents. Walter loses Cloyd temporarily in the blizzard, suffers fear and remorse before he finds him, and ultimately finds his life at risk unless civilization in the form of an emergency helicopter ride can lift him to the safety of a hospital. Nature proves to have at least two sides—one romantic and the other quite realistic and dangerous. Thus Hobbs suggests that the traditional escape from society is not without its own dangers.

Hobbs also explores the blending of Cloyd's traditional Ute customs and beliefs with the positive aspects that can be found in modern societal norms.

In fact, modern readers can find strong ecological values in Native American cultures. Hobbs points out these worthy ideals in Cloyd's cultural beliefs while also making sure to demonstrate the security and safety afforded by progressive society. Thus he does not rely strictly on a chauvinistic approach to the wilderness and the mythical retreat into it experienced by his male characters. His themes are broader than those which merely portray home and hearth as impediments to the flowering of man's spirit. He suggests a balanced approach that is full of potential value for both young and older adults.

Topics for Discussion

1. Until he meets Walter, Cloyd really has no one in his life to whom he feels responsible. Why did Hobbs create his main character as someone with so little adult supervision?

2. What role does Rusty play in the novel? Why is his shooting of the bear necessary?

3. Hobbs opens the book with Cloyd visiting his father in the hospital. Since Cloyd's father is in a coma, what possible reason can Hobbs have for beginning the story with that scene?

4. After all of his work to erect them, why does Cloyd destroy the fence posts?

5. Through much of the book Cloyd expresses his desire to return to his tribe. When he is given the chance to do so, he declines—why?

6. Cloyd is very excited by his discovery of the stone bear. What does the bear signify to Cloyd? Why is it so special to him?

7. What is revealed about the lives and beliefs of Utes and other Native Americans through Cloyd's experiences?

8. What comparisons can you make between Rusty's attitude toward Nature and Cloyd's?

9. Why does Cloyd buy the peach tree seedlings at the end of the book? What does this action say about Cloyd and his relationship with Walter?

10. Will Hobbs sets most of his book in somewhat wild, untamed country.

Why do you think he does so? Could this story have happened in a similar way in the city? Why or why not?

11. Despite his love for the outdoors, Cloyd struggles against and even helps destroy some elements of Nature in the story. What is Hobbs saying about Cloyd, Nature, and human beings in general by allowing these things to happen?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Cloyd's grandmother told him, "Live in a good way." Compare what Cloyd understands that to mean to the interpretation probably understood by Walter and Rusty.

2. Near the end of the book, Cloyd reflects that, "The hurt you get over makes you stronger." Agree or disagree with that statement based on what happens to Cloyd in the story.

Then reflect upon your own experiences and agree or disagree based on what your life has taught you.

3. Bears appear in various manners and places in the novel. Describe three "bears" from the story and discuss how each of them affects the development of plot and characters.

4. Cloyd's grandmother has warned him about owls. How do owls function in Ute tradition? Can you find out about themeaning and importance of owls to other cultures? Are there any similarities between these different cultures' beliefs?

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Baylor, Byrd. A God on Every Mountain Top: Stories of Southwest Indian Mountains. New York: Scribner's, 1981.

Illustrated by Carol Brown. Folk tales from Southwest Indian culture explaining the significance and importance of mountains to their beliefs.

Paulsen, Gary. Canyons. New York: Delacorte, 1990. Two boys experience similar rites of passage into manhood—Coyote Runs, an Apache youth in 1864; Brennan Cole, a young man who discovers a link to Coyote Run's past more than one hundred years later.

Yep, Laurence. Child of the Owl. New York: Harper, 1977. Her mother dead and her father in the hospital, young Casey searches for her roots and her cultural traditions in the San Francisco Chinatown of her grandmother.

She learns of the importance of owls, beliefs, and self-reliance while she encounters the customs of her ancestors.

Related Titles

Beardance (1993) relates further adventures of Cloyd, Walter, and grizzly bears. Scott O'Dell's Sing Down the Moon (1976) tells the story of a fourteen-year-old Navajo girl who confronts the struggle between her culture and that of the "whites." It is based on the true forced migration of the Navajo people from Arizona to New Mexico, 1863-1865. In Paul Pitts' Racing the Sun (1988), twelve-year-old Brandon discovers his Navajo roots through his grandfather's influence.

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