The Big Enchilada Short Guide

The Big Enchilada by L. A. Morse

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Contents

Characters

The protagonist, Sam Hunter, seems an odd mixture until one understands that his antagonism to "assholes" makes his actions and philosophy entirely consistent. Morse provides Hunter with a plausible motive for his philosophy that only outside the system can one be free enough to maintain any sense of personal integrity. The combination of Hunter's experiences in Viet Nam and his memories of his father, "a straight man in a crooked town" who was murdered, add some plausibility to Hunter's strong antagonism for "slime." If Hunter seems to enjoy violence and to be callously indifferent to the fates of those whose actions have merited retribution, he always has a reason. At one point, for example, caught in a traffic jam next to a car whose quadraphonic speakers blast country-and-western music at him, Hunter asked the driver to turn down the music. When the driver refused, Hunter intimidated him by pulling a weapon on the driver. If this seems excessive, one should note that Hunter gave the driver an opportunity to distinguish himself from the community of "assholes," and only when the driver's response failed to do so did Hunter take further action. Hunter's rage is always focused and entirely under his control.

Hunter's ready acceptance of the limitations of his own career ("It wasn't one of your noble callings") and his recognition of some ethical limitations (he extorts information from those on whom he has some sort of hold) do not contradict his principles. If his methods seem excessive, he is dealing with opponents who will not respond to other forms of persuasion, and Hunter is consistent in his approach. For example, he rejects the double standard after he learns that Clarissa Acker, a client who attracts him strongly, has sought sexual consolation elsewhere. This justifies his accepting the advances of an adolescent named "Candi or Cindi or Bambi or one of those goddamn dumb names," on the grounds that if Clarissa is free, so is he. Hunter also reveals his capacity to feel pity for victims, as when he sympathizes with the blackmail victim Adrian Sweet and tries to solve Sweet's problem.

Other characters in the novel exaggerate the traits of familiar detective fiction types. One thug, Mountain, is larger than life, an ex-wrestler who manhandles Hunter as if Hunter were a child. Another, Simon Acker, is an Aryan of the Ubermensch school who believes that all others exist solely to provide him pleasure. A third, Stubby Argyll, is a private detective whose office is a table with a telephone at a neighborhood pool hall and whose response to an assignment to tail Hunter is to betray his client. Charles Watkins is a straight but not very bright cop. His partner, Burroughs, is a straight but very antagonistic cop.

Ratchett is a crooked and antagonistic vice-squad cop whose name suggests the foul smell of his corruption. Much of the satire in the novel results from the exaggeration of these types.

Social Concerns

Like The Old Dick (1981), The Big Enchilada expresses its theme through the philosophy of its protagonist. Morse has commented that the major themes of the novel might well be sex, violence, and food, but the major appeal of Sam Hunter is that he does what most of us would like to do if only we dared. Hunter has an extremely functional view of human nature. For Hunter, people are either "assholes" or decent, and the cornerstone of his philosophy is "never to let the assholes get away with it."

Although the sexual and violent episodes of the novel are frequent, they are not gratuitous. Hunter directs his antagonism exclusively toward those whose actions remove them from the community of decent people. The reader finds Hunter admirable in his unswerving commitment to his sense of ethics and likable in his humorous, if cynical, way of telling his story. One critic has commented that he would cross the street to avoid meeting Hunter, but a decent person has nothing to fear from Hunter. Otherwise, crossing the country would not be enough.

Sam Hunter frequently criticizes contemporary society in passing, mentioning at various points the prevalence of juvenile crime, corruption of the police, the stupidity of freeway planners, and the pretentiousness of almost everyone whom Hunter meets.

The focus of Hunter's wrath, however, is exploitation. The pornography and prostitution rackets exploit runaways, expensive restaurants exploit customers by overcharging for inferior food and drink, employers exploit illegal aliens, exclusive clubs exploit clients' idiosyncratic sexual preferences through blackmail, and the array of Hollywood hucksters exploits the unrealistic dreams of those who have flocked to the center of the movie industry.

Hunter comments sarcastically on shoddy construction, planned obsolescence, fraudulent cults, and other methods of separating the foolish from their money without giving full value.

However, the point of the novel is not to present a catalogue of abuses but to reveal in Sam Hunter the enviable state of a man who refuses to accept such treatment.

Techniques

The plot of The Big Enchilada is extremely complex at the beginning, but, like a Dickens novel, ties the subplots into one by the end. After Mountain tears apart Hunter's office as a warning to Hunter to stay away from Domingo, Hunter assumes there must be a connection to one of the three cases he is currently handling, so he explores these to try to discover the identity of the man who, in his view, owes him at least a new desk. All three cases, to varying degrees, somehow tie in with Domingo, but the process by which Hunter puts the pieces together offers the reader a puzzle, complete with clues that help one realize when Hunter may be on the wrong track. Ultimately the Domingo incident leads to the discovery of a pornography/"snuff film"/heroin/extortion scheme, and Hunter, with the help of a transparently ambitious district attorney, brings down the entire organization.

The complicated interweaving of the three subplots into one keeps the reader off balance as Hunter tries to solve the puzzle and protect himself at the same time.

One source of suspense is Hunter's methods of investigation. He believes that the best procedure, when in doubt, is to stir up everyone until the pieces fall into place. This necessarily places Hunter in jeopardy from a variety of antagonists, ranging from knife-wielding punks to deadly experts in murder and mutilation. The result is more action, both sexual and combative, than one would ordinarily find in three detective novels.

Related Titles

Sleaze (1985) presents another adventure of Sam Hunter, developing some of the themes of The Big Enchilada with greater emphasis. In addition to various comments denigrating the poor quality of modern life and the ethical shortcomings of humanity in general, Hunter focuses more explicitly on the exploitation implicit in pornography, drugs, and the movie industry. At one point Hunter comments that he has "had some experience with snakes," recalling one of the more surprising features of the ultimate showdown in The Big Enchilada. Some supporting characters reappear, most notably the straight but antagonistic cop Burroughs. In the earlier novel Hunter and Burroughs had both found it strange that they were on the same side. In Sleaze their roles are more typical of the traditional private eye novel as Burroughs tries to find Hunter while Hunter tries to find the chief villain.

Hunter's sexual and combative adventures have become more extreme in Sleaze, but his philosophy has not changed. In The Big Enchilada Hunter's encounters with individuals or groups usually resulted in broken bones for Hunter's antagonists, but in Sleaze he goes much farther. Attacked by a group of four, Hunter inflicts several injuries, tearing open one man's cheek, pulling off an ear, biting off a nose, tearing off a substantial patch of beard, and the like. After the others flee as fast as they can limp, Hunter summarizes his attitude: "If there had been more of them, I might've ended up with enough parts to assemble a thug of my own." In Sleaze, such comments employ black humor to make the satiric dimension of Hunter's excesses more apparent than in The Big Enchilada.

Hunter, as earlier, continues his private war against "assholiness."

When he discovers that an expensive car, with the license plate "STUD 1," has blocked his car in its parking space, Hunter batters the offending vehicle out of his way. When a nineteen-year-old refuses to lower the volume of his blaring "ghetto-blaster," Hunter throws the radio into a swimming pool. As before, however, Hunter sympathizes with the decent victims of various exploiters. He pities the beautiful but victimized Alana sufficiently not to exploit her sexually, and when he watches a pornographic film that features Alana as "a sexual thing," he comments, "It was not nice, the idea of being sexual master and slave, but it was potent, very potent." In Sleaze, Morse has taken more pains to help readers recognize the philosophy behind Hunter's sexual and violent actions. By providing instances of dramatic irony in Hunter's remarks, Morse makes it easier for the reader to recognize when Hunter's detachment from others is intended to make an important satiric point. Once the reader recognizes that Hunter's actions are ethically consistent, the sex and violence become less significant than Hunter's wry perspective on what is wrong with his world.

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