

Bugles in the Afternoon Short Guide

Bugles in the Afternoon by Ernest Haycox

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Characters

The characters in *Bugles in the Afternoon* are both historical and fictional. Haycox manages to balance his treatment of both so well that neither upstages the other. The historical figures — Custer, Mrs. Custer, Capt.

Frederick Benteen, Major Marcus Reno, and others — are well drawn and interplay with the fictional characters: Kern Shafter, Josephine Russell, and Edward Garnett. Haycox's fictional protagonist, Kern Shafter, seems to be troubled by an experience during the Civil War and after the war can only find a sense of satisfaction back in the Army. He is a competent man whose actions and bearing hint of his having attained some sort of command station in the past. With the 7th Cavalry he appears satisfied to be a sergeant. Edward Garnett, who knew Kern in the past, is now an officer with the 7th and makes no attempt to conceal his hatred for Shafter.

While the relationship between Josephine and Kern develops, with some obstacles thrown in the path by Garnett, the bigger drama of impending disaster unfolds. The commander of the 7th and the officers who served him move toward the fatal clash with the Sioux. As the 7th moves away from Fort Lincoln and goes over a ridge, the sun brightens the haze and the regiment appears as a mirage in the sky. A man remaining at the fort saw it as a "sign." Shafter, who was with Reno's command, is wounded but survives the brunt of the Sioux strike aimed primarily at Custer and his troops.



Social Concerns

Perhaps no clash between Indians and white men does more to highlight the sorry relations between the two than that of George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry and Sitting Bull's forces at the Little Big Horn in 1876. The trauma of Custer's defeat and death was a national experience that continues to stir feelings in books and motion pictures. The book, one of Haycox's best, is widely read for very good reasons.

Custer and the 7th Cavalry are not vague figures painted on a backdrop but very much a part of his novel. The story is told from the perspective of Kern Shafter, a veteran of the Civil War, who travels to Bismarck to sign up with the 7th. On the journey he meets Josephine Russell who is going there to meet her father.

Shafter fits into the Army with ease and is soon advanced to sergeant. He goes out on patrols, sees Josephine, and the romance takes form, but the presence of Custer is always sensed.

Haycox portrays him as a complex man, a man driven to disaster by his "enormous ambitions," one who scorns caution. Contemptuous of the advice of others or the ability of the Sioux, Custer's decision results in the unwilling involvement of his men who must share the disaster with him. Haycox shows that "the power of waiting was not in him," and that as a man he never grew up.



Themes/Techniques

All of Ernest Haycox's stories are set in the West. His protagonists are either pitted against the elements, the hard and grinding tasks of establishing a foothold in a hostile land, or opposing the lawless or avaricious. In *Bugles in the Afternoon* Haycox's theme is the Army in the West. While he did extensive research on Custer and the fatal Battle of the Little Big Horn, his own military experience is evident in his story. He regarded his own service in an infantry outfit as one of the most satisfactory times of his life.

In *Bugles in the Afternoon*, as in many of his novels, Haycox tells his story through the protagonist, a rival or opponent and two women of contrasting personalities and character. Generally the romantic element concerns two women whose sharply contrasting personalities give the protagonist trouble understanding his own feelings about them. The hero is usually a loner, a restless man who appears out of nowhere and for no reason. A "Hamlet like" figure or, as Bernard DeVoto called him, a "Sun God hero" he becomes involved in several conflicts. He is torn between withdrawing and moving on, or accepting his social responsibilities and fighting his enemies on his own terms.

In *Bugles in the Afternoon* Kern Shafter is Haycox's "thinking" character. He is a man of strong individualism, a character in tension, as one critic described him. He is the sort of man one would expect to encounter in the West, reflective, given to listening to his fellow men as well as nature, and to sifting for the meanings behind words.

Haycox's heroes usually ride into a situation and help resolve it. His settings are small towns, sometimes actual, but many times fictional. Whether he uses an actual town of the times or creates one, Haycox provides enough details to give the place a sense of authenticity. He once said he always strived for "a robust story, crowded, detailed, active, a good story, full of brutality and tragedy; with its pieces of vivid action — and the will o'wisp romance."

Adaptations

At least seven of Ernest Haycox Western stories have been adapted to motion pictures: Trouble Shooter appeared in 1939 as Union Pacific; Man in the Saddle appeared in 1951; Sundown Jim appeared in 1942; Canyon Passage appeared in 1946; Bugles in the Afternoon appeared in 1952, starring Ray Miland, Hugh Marlowe, and Helena Carter; and Alder Gulch was released as The Far Country in 1955. The successful motion picture, Stagecoach, was taken from his story The Stage to Lordsburg (1937).

Literary Precedents

Ernest Haycox has been compared to Zane Grey, but Grey is a precedent only insofar as both were prolific writers of Westerns and both were popular with readers. From all indications, none of the students of the Western story have been able to show that Haycox's style and technique had been influenced by writers of such stories who preceded him. If anything, the preponderance of evidence seems to show that he had more imitators than any other writer in the field. His staunchly individualistic approach, his unique style and the marvel of his dialogues are not to be found in any of the stories before him. Perhaps the difference between what Haycox wrote and what others had produced is best illustrated by the reports that readers in England demanded quality and authenticity in the writers of Western fiction and found both in Ernest Haycox.

Related Titles

Bugles in the Afternoon is a fictional account of George Armstrong Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Haycox's "Weight of Command" is the story of a commander about to lead his men in a battle against the Sioux. Unlike Bugles in the Afternoon, the story is not based on any historical facts, but it has something of the authentic flavor of the Custer story.

Trouble Shooter (1937), as historical fiction, is concerned with the building of the Union Pacific Railroad. The Border Trumpet (1939) had its historical roots in Army life at the Arizona frontier station of Fort Grant. Alder Gulch (1942), another novel with an historical theme, concerns Montana after the discovery of gold in 1864 and the activity of Henry Plummer's gang.

The Earthbreakers The Earthbreakers (1957) is a novel of how American pioneers met the hard realities of building homes, clearing land for pastures and grain fields, and how they established a toehold during the first crucial year of frontier life.

The settlers' custom of pooling resources and labor and of sharing whatever they had with neighbors is clearly delineated. Despite personality clashes and individual ambitions, coming to the aid of neighbors in distress is unquestioned. The "society" of Haycox's story is raw, and sometimes brawling, but it still values tradition, integrity, and concern. The Earthbreakers is an example of Haycox's recurring theme of the past and the "influence of tradition on the present."

While much of what has been said about Haycox's themes in assessing Bugles in the Afternoon, can apply to many of his books, he came closer to the "panoramic" novel in this final work. His theme is the trials and tribulations of a party of settlers making a rugged journey to Oregon in 1845 and settling down to face its first winter.

Haycox peoples this story with numerous characters, and he stresses their individual reactions to the hardships of frontier life.

The Earthbreakers has a fuller cast of protagonists than many Westerns, but the principal protagonist is Rice Burnett. A former trapper, he joins the party of settlers journeying to Oregon to get a new start in a fertile, unsettled country. The settlers' motives for making the journey vary. Burnett plans to build a mill. Another trapper in the party, Cal Lockyear, is not as interested in starting a new life for himself as he is interested in satisfying his lust for Edna Lattimore, the daughter of one of the settlers. Burnett, too, is drawn to Edna, with whom he has an affair before he marries Katherine Gay.

Other characters who play vital roles in the broad canvas of Haycox's story are John and Martha Gay, Lucy and George Collingwood, Bob Hawn and his Indian squaw, Dr. Ralph Whitcomb, and a self-ordained preacher named Billy Lord.



Haycox relies on action and dialogue, rather than exposition, to develop his characters. For example, Harris Eby reveals much about his personality and his physical appearance when he says, "I'm too big to fight anybody. Never been able to fight anybody. You boys don't know what that means. I have got to be good natured. I got to be careful who I step on, like a Percheron."

In *The Earthbreakers* and *The Adventurers* (1955), his last two books, Haycox moves away from the standard genre and strives to write the true history of the West. His characters often wrestle more with nature and the elements than they do with each other.

The rugged individualism so dominant in his earlier Westerns now gives way to a willing cooperation of men and women faced with a matter of survival.

Haycox studied the history of the West, read the journals written by pioneer women, and was able to apply his researches in achieving a more authentic background.

The primary literary precedents for *The Earthbreakers* are a blend of Ernest Haycox's constant researches and his own previous writings. In 1940 he wrote a series of stories about the opening of new lands for homesteading: "Some Were Brave," "Dark Land Waiting," "Faithfully, Judith," and "Deep Winter." His personal experience with small Western settlements and his extensive research library of autobiographies, reminiscences, diaries, and pamphlets contained the "juice of experience" from which he shaped his stories. He certainly was familiar with the *Oregon Historical Journal*, the *Journal of an Overland Journey to Oregon Made in the Year 1849* by William J. Watson, *The Sod-House Frontier* by Everett Dick, Francis Parkman's famous *Oregon Trail*, and possibly *Rural Life in the U.S.* by C. Taylor.

But the genesis of *The Earthbreakers* goes beyond the research stage when Haycox incorporates the series of stories he wrote about homesteading.

While not the plot outline of his last novel, they were the essential ingredients from which he shaped his "panoramic" story.



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