The Bushwhacked Piano Short Guide

The Bushwhacked Piano by Thomas McGuane

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Characters

McGuane's early novels have often been targets for complaint about the flatness of his characters. Wayne Codd, a peeping torn and addle-pate ranch foreman, is certainly a caricature — but a splendidly funny one. He is also notable as an early, comparatively harmless version of a character type portrayed more chillingly as Nichol Dance in Ninety-Two in the Shade (1973).

C. J. Clovis, on the other hand, has reminded some readers of a cartoon character, complete with detachable body parts and an encyclopedic love for bats. Together with Dr. Proctor, who botches Payne's hemorrhoid surgery, Clovis facilitates the gradual deepening of Payne's helplessness and despair, both in regard to his place in an America gone mad, and in his efforts to maintain a refuge of love in spite of everything.

Payne's girl, Ann Fitzgerald, has come under particular attack for the way in which McGuane limits her to the role of spoiled, self-involved child, willing to play the floozy for the sake of experiment but finally dependent on the security of money and her "things."

Yet, in fairness to the novel if not to its author, it should be pointed out that Ann exists here less as a character than as an obsession, the object of Payne's half-baked romantic fantasies, with whom he would "lurch and twitch from the dawnlit foothills to the sweet sunset-shattered finality of the high lonesome." From this point of view, Ann's "flatness" seems a necessary adjunct to the development of Payne, without carrying an endorsement of the latter's vision. It will remain McGuane's task in his later novels, as he has stated in an interview, "to work closer and closer to an authentic vision of sexuality, using satire as a purgative."

Social Concerns/Themes

T he Bushwhacked Piano provides a rambunctious and startling introduction to McGuane's universe of social concerns. Its hero, Nicholas Payne, rejects the easy life of corporate sellouts offered him by his parents, a "declining snivelization" where daughters are sold to avoid sticky lawsuits, and the view through the company skylight reveals that one would rather be outside than in. The alternative Payne pursues, as pointed out by several critics of this novel, would seem best identified simply as "fun." Yet, there is a sense of futility in that pursuit even early on, as Payne's game of crotchgrabbing on roller skates ends in the predictable spill, the victory going to "gravity."

Despite such ominous signs, the novel marks the trajectory of Payne's gestures of repudiation, through his following the beloved Ann Fitzgerald across the country, with stops for broncobusting, punching out cowboys, and offending the parents — a litany of joyous antisocial behavior. The crucial contact occurs in his partnership with C. J. Clovis, a double-amputee con-man who convinces Payne to join him in the construction and sale of bat towers, complete with bats, to gullible communities wishing to keep down insect populations at outdoor gatherings. The phenomenology of the bat tower in this novel is itself a remarkably deft commentary on the values and blindnesses of corporate America, and a striking parody of the entrepreneurial ethic: Vastly overpriced, the towers not only play on the desire for more that plagues those who have too much already, but they also trade one affliction for another, vastly more repellent one.

Naturally, their enterprise collapses: The bats fly off, Clovis dies, and Payne is reconciled with the world of authority through a televised mock trial for fraud, and through his capture as a "cautionary monument to the failed life" in Ann's artistic photographs. The title of The Bushwhacked Piano, an uneasy conjunction of outlaw banter and staid cultural artifact, is further reflected in the last line of the novel: "I am at large." As opposed to "I am free," this final statement of Payne's condition is a reminder that to be "at large" presumes an act of criminality, and a judgment to be fled.

Techniques

The Bushwhacked Piano is especially noteworthy for the verbal pyrotechnics that have come to be associated with Thomas McGuane. Equipped with a keen ear for voices and a love for the music of the language, and absolutely fearless of giving offense, McGuane plunges into this novel and emerges with a parade of sparkling metaphors and outrageous stylistic eccentricities, from warped cliches to broken similes, from super-cool slang to lush literary exposition. McGuane has sometimes been accused of glibness, and of a love for the wisecrack that comes at the expense of the fiction, but his best jokes are as funny as anything written by an American of this century, and place him squarely as a practitioner of black humor equal to Joseph Heller or Philip Roth.

The Bushwhacked Piano also indicates McGuane's affinity for film, both in the quality of its images and in its frequent similarity to a script, especially in the interplay between Payne and Codd.

McGuane's stylistic credo apparently depends upon the complete avoidance of pretense: Slapping at intellectuals and morons with equal verve, he produces a reckless prose that emphasizes the act of writing in a free-wheeling self-declamation.

Key Questions

McGuane's fictions, with their joyous iconoclasm and willingness to attack any sacred cow whatsoever, have the potential to offend everyone from the redneck to the artiste, and ought to provoke lively and spirited discussion.

His early works' emphasis on political satire and freewheeling antisocial destructiveness may not sit well in a deeply post-1960s age, and his treatment of women has come under increasing fire in an age of increased sensitivity to feminist demands. Issues of particular interest are McGuane's abiding vision of the father-son relationship hanging over every man, his protagonists' struggles to establish some reasonable relation to the women in their lives, and his critique of the American ethic of consumerism. Further issues such as the view of American civilization as seen from its margins, the personal quest for meaning in a crass and blurry moral landscape, and the failure of comforting myths and lasting romance, complicate and enrich the picture.

1. In what way is Clevis's bat tower an accurate symbol for the commercialized manipulation of human desire that plagues contemporary society? Is the failure of the tower merely a practical technicality, as the idea of the tower retains its appeal?

2. To what extent is an ideal of machismo held forth in this novel, and to what extent is it satirized? How does Payne's threatening of the drunken shrimpers differ from Codd's threatening of Payne?

3. Are the demands of the parents here, the Paynes and the Fitzgeralds, unreasonable ones for their children to meet? Are the parents themselves adequate representations of a vacuous suburban mentality?

4. Why is Ann not possessed of a genuine artistic sensibility, despite Payne's attraction to her on this basis?

5. What is the ultimate goal of Payne's quest? What is the vision of an unsullied America that McGuane posits here as alternative?

6. What, beyond mindless vandalism, is symbolized by Payne's shooting the piano? Is it an understandable and appropriate reaction to his world, or merely an immature and violent one?

7. What is the character of McGuane's humor, its intents and mechanisms? Where does it work well, is genuinely funny? Are there places where it fails, turning perhaps to bitterness or despair?

Literary Precedents

Comparisons have been made between McGuane's work and that of a variety of precursors. In his easy manipulation of dialogue and brilliant excesses of style, he has been associated with Faulkner. His curious attachment to the flotsam of contemporary life and his stinging indictment of America in the age of neon and television recall the fiction of Donald Barthelme; in his attention to bewildered people desperately clinging to the remains of a fractured world, he most closely resembles Thomas Pynchon.

McGuane himself has credited Stephen Crane and especially Mark Twain as profound influences, along with such contemporary novelists as Kurt Vonnegut and Jim Harrison.

The most persistent association to McGuane's fiction has been with that of Ernest Hemingway. In everything from common locales (in Key West and the Rockies) to the love of sport fishing, to the detection of Hemingwayesque "codes" governing the behavior of men locked in a primal struggle with other men, McGuane's novels have been compared with those of his predecessor. Yet these comparisons seem finally to miss the point, in their failure to acknowledge the continued ironic parody present everywhere in McGuane, from his repeated explosions of the laconic Hemingway style to his making George Russell (the proto-Yuppie and romantic rival of Nicholas Payne) an aficionado of bullfighting. McGuane has noted the treacherous difficulties of aligning anyone's work alongside Hemingway's, likening it to the use of a blunt instrument in a "primary lumping attack" on the younger writer.

Instead, it seems more reasonable, and more in keeping with the actuality of his novels, to recognize how McGuane, in the words of Peter Straub, "deliberately warps the famous Hemingway ethical codes," using them "obliquely and disbelievingly." In Ninety-Two in the Shade especially, McGuane's reliance is not upon the presence of an inviolate machismo ideal, but on the tenuous play of language and intellect, on good humor and bad manners.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994