

# Captains and the Kings Short Guide

## Captains and the Kings by Taylor Caldwell

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# Characters

Joseph Francis X. Armagh was thirteen years old when his mother died on the ship bearing them to America from the Potato Famine. At home the Catholic Irish were harassed by the hated Sassenagh, but in the strange new land, they were stripped of all dignity. Joe vows to assume financial responsibility for his brother and infant sister, entrusts them to a Catholic orphanage and painfully makes his way into a barbarically inhospitable and prejudiced pre-Civil War America. He is relentless in his climb upwards; self-pity is as repugnant to him as sentimentality, and compassion is an insult.

On his way to Titusville for the oil boom he is adopted by a newly wealthy Irishman who is impressed by the principled youth and eventually makes him his heir. He wisely diversifies his funds and soon he is one of the wealthiest men in the country.

But there is little room for love in this character's life. His brother and sister, whom he duly retrieves from the orphanage, are a disappointment to him and soon leave him: the brother to pursue a career as an entertainer and the sister to become a nun. Joe marries, but he does not love his wife; nor is he much impressed, at first, with his children.

Political influence comes with financial success, and with that comes membership in the coolly plotting international Elite of bankers. To further their aims, Joe attempts to blackmail Senator Bassett of Massachusetts, who is sponsoring a bill which would aid the struggling unions for the benefit of the American working man. Thus Joe wishes the poor to suffer exactly as he did and to break free of their poverty, as he did, by luck and pluck alone.

In what is perhaps the highest emotional pitch of the novel, Joe tells the Senator that if he does not withdraw his support of the bill, he will reveal the fact that Bassett's beloved grandmother was a mulatto. The Senator, however, cannot be swayed and it is Joe who has second thoughts. But by the next day the Senator has committed suicide and laid a curse on all the Armaghs. From here on, all tragedies that occur — the infantilization of Joe's daughter after an accident, the sniping death of his young son, the murder of his brother Sean — he attributes to the curse. But this belief does not soften his ruthless nature.

Joe is obsessed that his son Rory become president of the United States.

He takes him to meetings of the Elite for their support, but the Elite find Rory's youth a stumbling block. Furthermore, the Elite are coming to distrust Joe himself; his sarcasm they find abrasive, and with his memories of the hated Sassenagh in Ireland, he sometimes can not conceal his own distrust of their aspired universal despotism.

Unlike his father, Rory, beneath his superficial accession to his father's demands, is really a believer in the people, and he comes to find the goals of the cabal intolerable. When he decides to divulge what he knows, he is eliminated by assassination.



## Social Concerns

The overwhelming theory advanced in this novel is that the world is run by an international, apolitical cabal of bankers. According to the author's voice, the American Civil War was planned in London in 1857 in order to raise vast sums of money. This cabal of the "Elite" has no nationalistic prejudices, for they are loyal only to each other and to their banking interests.

When Abraham Lincoln talked forgiveness for the South and threatened the extravagant hopes for plunder and profit from the vanquished land, he was eliminated. When Garfield showed sympathy for the plight of immigrant worker, he was eliminated. McKinley did not want a Spanish-American War (although his vice president did), and he too was eliminated. When Rory Armagh, groomed for the presidential nomination in 1912, decides to blow the whistle on the Elite, he is also assassinated.

Being apolitical, members of the Elite are not Socialists. Yet Socialism, with its class hatreds, leads to war and exploitation that will in turn lead to the final takeover, the "millennium" of slavery under the benign sway of the Elite. The Elite was responsible also for bludgeoning into law a federal income tax for the United States, despite its dubious constitutionality, as a means to finance wars, create confusion, and promote the mechanization of humanity. (In real life, the Internal Revenue Service, referred to by Caldwell as the Infernal Revenue Service, was for her a tremendous bete noire.)

Many reviewers found this theory outlandish, ludicrous, and even harmful. Yet a mere few years later, in 1976, reviewer Martin Levin found Caldwell's ideology beginning to make more sense in the light of what he calls "the current conspiracy explosion."



## Techniques

Despite an absence of literary style (Caldwell is a storyteller, not a stylist), the raw emotions of this work grip the reader and the characterization, although not consummate in a literary sense, is satisfying to a general audience. Although there is a certain looseness of construction and carelessness about details (e.g., the use of the term muckraker before its entrance into the language, the Molly Maguires described as railroad workers instead of coal miners), immediacy is achieved by references to issues of the times and occasionally by the use of direct quotations from historical figures. Local color is achieved by frequent use of such terms as boyeen, colleen, spalpeen and references to the hated Sassenagh, which is the Gaelic word for "Saxon."

The suspense derives mainly from, first, whether or not Joe Armagh will make it at all; and, second, whether he will be able to counter all of the many obstacles that bestrew his path to ultra-moguldom. Two thirds of the novel are devoted to Joe, and the final third covers the career of his son Rory.

# Themes

One theme is the greed of those who have, as opposed to the ignorance and credulity of those who have not. The story is of Joseph Armagh's revenge on a world that forced him to deny his own identity as an Irishman and as a "Roman" (Catholic). By Joe's own characterization, mankind is the most selfish species ever "spewed out of hell," and the novel is consistent with this vision. Joe's ruthless climb to the top is a joyless quest devoid of humor, satisfaction, or empathy.

Because the inevitable assassination of his son Rory Armagh is accompanied by references to the apocalyptic vision of St. John the Divine who foretold the enslavement of the world, there is as well a lesson in the implacability of Biblical prophecy. The last true episode of the book is a scene with Sister Mary Bernarde in a Maryland convent. The room smells of wax and fern and incense, and the nun's aged voice is firm and gentle and consoling, even as she hears of her brother's death. Caldwell appears to be saying, then, that if the vision of St. John is inevitable through the workings of the captains and the kings who serve the cabal of the Elite, then perhaps the most admirable and effective tactic for survival is in monastic seclusion, away from the terror and the pitfalls of this bedeviled world.

A minor theme is the counterpoint that Caldwell develops between the two basic types of Irishmen: the blithe and outgoing Irishman as opposed to the morose and Druidical. Joe represents the latter type, while the cheerful breed is typified by Joe's father Daniel and by his brother Sean, both of whom Joe despises. He hates his light-hearted and irresponsible father because he failed to provide for his family in death, and he hates Sean because he so much resembles their father. The gifted and sensitive Sean, first a minstrel and then a famous tenor, assumes a further dimension of scorn in his brother's eyes: Having become homosexual, he is murdered by his jealous lover.

# Adaptations

In 1976, a television miniseries of *Captains and the Kings* was made. Directed by Douglas Heyes and Allen Reisner, it starred Richard Jordan, Ray Bolger, Patty Duke Astin, Joanna Pettet, and Barbara Parkins. It was one of the first such miniseries, and, because another syndicate hastened to purchase *Testimony of Two Men*, Caldwell was the only author with the distinction of having two such miniseries going at the same time. Caldwell was never partial to scenes of sexual descriptions, so the miniseries was forced to make numerous additions. Caldwell herself did not follow much of the miniseries; she was confused by the added sex scenes and, at the time, she was almost totally deaf.

But according to Jess Steam, the miniseries made apparent the reason that her books were never successfully converted to motion pictures. They are simply too long. Only a ten- or twelve -hour miniseries made for television can portray all of the conglomerative and interlocking details that she packed into her novels.

## Literary Precedents

Captains and the Kings belongs to the tradition of the French romanfleuve and particularly to the genre of the dynastic saga; the term saga having been made fashionable during the time of Caldwell's youth by John Galsworthy in his Forsyte Saga (1906-1922). After vicissitudes of popularity, the dynastic saga is said to have been revitalized by Angus Wilson in No Laughing Matter (1967), a mere half decade before the appearance of Captains and the Kings.





## Related Titles

The long dynastic saga was not a new undertaking for Caldwell. Her very first novel *Dynasty of Death* (1938) about the Bouchard clan who controls a huge munitions trust, had been so long in its original form that her editor, Maxwell Perkins, took the last part from her manuscript and outlined for her its two sequels, *The Eagles Gather* (1940) and *Time No Longer* (1941). Joseph Armagh in his permanent obsession with money and power strongly resembles the Bouchards of the trilogy as well as Franz Stoessel, the ruthless steel tycoon of *Strong City* (1942). *Let Love Come Last* (1949), also a ragstoriches saga, has the added angle of unappreciative and exploitive children who outwardly conspire against their patriarch.



# Copyright Information

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