Cassidy Short Guide

Cassidy by Morris West

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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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Characters

As the title suggests, the figure of Charles Parnell Cassidy, head of one of Australia's major provinces, dominates the action of the novel. Yet Cassidy appears only briefly in the tale. Martin Gregory, his son-in-law, is a successful lawyer with substantial connections to the London banking industry.

Estranged from his father-in-law because of Cassidy's high-handed treatment of everyone with whom he comes in contact, Gregory has established himself on another continent. When he finds himself made executor of Cassidy's estate, he is forced to re-enter the world of Australian politics — a world riddled with criminal elements. The novel is built around Gregory's trans formation as he adapts himself to the ruthless ways of Cassidy's associates.

Carrying out the terms of the will, Gregory learns to deal with corrupt politicians, drug dealers who have infiltrated legitimate business interests in Australia (and throughout the world), as well as gangsters and military men who find murder a simple method of removing obstacles to their financial and political comfort. In the course of the novel Gregory is constantly tempted to compromise his own ethics in an attempt to extricate himself and his family from this web of underworld intrigue. Additionally, there is a strong subplot involving the love-hate relationship Gregory and his wife have for Cassidy, whom they revered and admired but whose ruthlessness and disregard for law they could not understand or accept.

Social Concerns/Themes

C assidy is a novel with global as well as personal dimensions. The title character is an influential Australian politician who has become rich and politically powerful by establishing contacts with various underworld figures in his own country and abroad.

Upon his death, he leaves the settlement of his estate to his son-in-law Martin Gregory, the real protagonist of the novel. Gregory was once Cassidy's protege but became estranged from his father-in-law. As Gregory tries to unravel the complicated skein of associations through which Cassidy amassed his considerable fortune, the reader is shown the pervasive influence of criminal elements on contemporary politics and international business. The novel suggests that honest men have little hope of ridding society of this corruption.

Concurrent with this global concern is a more individual one: Gregory's personal quest for knowledge. Once Cassidy's apparent business heir, and partially responsible for Cassidy's estrangement from his only daughter, Gregory seeks to understand the man who has poisoned his own life and that of his family. Underlying this search is the archetypal quest of a son to kill or replace the father, for although Cassidy himself may be dead, his memory haunts Gregory and his wife. West is as interested in dramatizing the expurgation of this powerful father-figure from Martin Gregory's life as he is in exposing the seamy underside of politics and international business.

Techniques

Cassidy is first and foremost an adventure novel. Heavily dependent on plotting and suspense devices, the novel moves quickly from incident to incident. The narrative is told from the point of view of Martin Gregory, and it achieves its impact from the sense of discovery and the impending doom that he feels as he learns the details of Cassidy's political empire. West devotes little attention to character development (minor characters are especially superficial) or to an examination of motives. Setting is suggested rather than detailed; West's interest lies primarily in exploring the events in which his protagonist is involved. Like many popular novels, Cassidy relies on the reader's acceptance of conventional morality regarding such issues as drugs and prostitution, and of the reader's often strong, if unexpressed, interest in power politics and sexual relationships.

Related Titles

The Navigator The Navigator (1976) has much in common with other West novels: its international cast of characters, its focus on the impact of one man on society as a whole, its heavy dose of philosophy and theology running beneath the surface of the adventure story. However, the novel also has literary forebears in the pantheon of travel literature, both fictional and nonfictional. Like Robinson Crusoe, it examines the ways in which man can bring order to the wilds. Like Captain Cooks's Voyages and Thor Heyerdahl's true-life narratives of his adventures in the Pacific, it presents vivid accounts of life in that region. More significant, however, is the novel's ties to the tradition of Utopian literature, works which examine the problems of founding and maintaining the perfect society.

As he does in many of his novels, West uses the adventures of his characters in The Navigator to explore the ramifications of important social issues. In this novel, the questions surrounding discoveries in anthropology and archaeology, especially those dealing with comparative societies, form the basis for that investigation.

Through techniques of plotting, West creates a cosmopolitan cast of characters, then has them marooned on a deserted island where they are free to try their hands at a variety of social arrangements, testing out the validity of traditional and innovative practices of living together as a group. In this way, West exposes both the weaknesses and the strengths of primitive and contemporary social orders, suggesting that much of the old is still valid, requiring only minor modification to be useful in today's terror-filled world. Through his examination of changing and changeable social orders, West reveals the unchanging nature of man.

Underlying the fast-paced plot of this novel is West's continuing concern with the nature of the good society.

The roles of leader and follower, governor and governed, are examined in detail through conversation and episode. Additionally, West spends considerable time exploring the tensions in human relationships brought on by radical changes in environment: The issue of "nature" vs. "nurture" in developing human character comes under West's literary microscope for careful scrutiny. Men and women who, by accident of birth or through hard work and manipulation in Western society have risen to the top of the social ladder, suddenly find themselves displaced by those whose inner strength permits them to cope better with the primitive conditions of the far-away Pacific island. Stripped of society's longstanding conventions, these men and women discover the real strengths of human character as they work to establish a new order for themselves.

West's cast of characters is international in scope. The dozen men and women who comprise the ship's crew hail from all points of the globe. The hero, Gunnar Thorkild, is a mixture of Scandinavian explorer and Polynesian native, an East-West melting pot who symbolizes in himself the amalgamation of philosophies, and the tensions of different world views that West places in conflict on the far-away island where most of

the action takes place. Because West wishes to emphasize the variety of nationalities which make up the party of castaways on the Island of The Navigators, many of the characters are little more than stereotypes; the "villains" are especially shallow. Nevertheless, West does manage a highly successful presentation of Thorkild, whose constant struggle to maintain social order on the island, establish a harmonious political climate, and satisfy the needs of this disparate band provides the central interest of the book.

The Navigator is, at first reading, an adventure novel. From the opening pages, characters encounter a series of crises and disasters: careers challenged, finances strained, love relationships forged and torn apart, shipwrecks, hurricanes, births and deaths. Simultaneously, West explores important contemporary social and moral issues through the extensive dialogue in which his characters engage. This group of castaways talks out almost every problem, from ways to erect shelters to the difference in philosophies between American financial magnates and Polynesian islanders. Because the cast of characters is international, West is able to use conversation, argument, and group debate to highlight the strengths and shortcomings of Western civilization.

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Proteus West's subject in Proteus (1979) is the effect of government-sponsored terrorism and repression. The central questions that the hero of this fast-paced tale must continually ask himself are: How far will men in power go to protect the sovereignty of their country and their own interests? When is one justified in retaliating, and how far can such retaliation be carried, against governments which resort to violence to silence dissent? A succession of orchestrated atrocities committed against the family of business magnate John Spada lead him to adopt his own extreme means for dealing with this crisis. West introduces the central issues by creating a hero already involved as head of Proteus, an international organization committed to helping those who are victims of inhumane treatment at the hands of supposedly responsible governments. The novel displays the futility of dealing with repressive governments; while small victories are possible, it is apparently no more than a Utopian dream to believe that repression practiced by those empowered to run countries can be totally eradicated. The portrait of a world hopelessly in the grips of such men is chilling, and West suggests no hope for improvement.

The tragedy of the Proteus organization, one consisting of good men from all around the world committed to helping those who cannot help themselves, is crystallized in the personal tragedy of the hero of this novel, John Spada. Presented initially as a largerthan-life figure similar to those in other popular novels who can overcome any impossible obstacle, John Spada gradually crumbles under the weight of the task he is forced to undertake. West's use of a figure who is far above the norm in political and financial circles heightens the tragedy by magnifying the helplessness of individuals to deal with organized efforts at repression. Other characters in the novel promote moderation — which is actually the same thing as capitulation. Spada refuses to give in without a fight, and not until the end of the novel, when he has orchestrated a plan to blackmail the world into releasing political prisoners, does he finally realize the impossibility of his task. When the nations of the world refuse even then to give in, he is faced with initiating mass destruction or admitting defeat. At that point he affirms what nations cannot: the importance of the individual human life.

Rather than launch biological warfare, he commits suicide. Ironically, by taking his own life, Spada asserts the value he places on life itself.

The Salamander The Salamander (1973) and Harlequin (1974) are predecessors of Proteus in West's continuing exploration of international political and social issues.

Like Proteus, these novels deal with global issues. The Salamander deals with political crisis in a country teetering on the brink of chaos, being tugged to Left and Right by extremists who seek to gain from the fall of the present regime. Harlequin examines the new phenomenon of computer-directed criminal activity, and explores the perennial theme of justifiable violence.

These novels, too, are populated with characters whose lives are far from ordinary, and whose actions can change the course of history for millions. Beneath the finely developed plots, both novels deal with questions of values in societies that seem to be moving progressively farther from humanistic and Christian principles of individual and social action.

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