Cloudy in the West Short Guide

Cloudy in the West by Elmer Kelton

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Overview

Cloudy in the West is the story of how twelve-year-old Joey Shipman learns to face with maturity the many problems that plague his life. Born and reared on the Shipman Ranch near Athens in East Texas, Joey's real mother has already died at the beginning of the story, and his father and his only other friend die shortly thereafter.

Without parents, Joey is left in the custody of a stepmother and her "cousin" who are determined to take ownership of the East Texas ranch Joey had inherited from "Pa." The stepmother inherits the property if Joey dies, and the boy finds his life in danger. Mysteriously, a bull attacks .

him, then several weeks later he finds a rattlesnake in his bed. Believing that his stepmother is behind the attempted murder, he flees to his only living relative, a second cousin named Beau, who has a reputation as an alcoholic.

This action of flight sets the stage for Joey to begin in earnest the painful process of personal growth towards maturity. Not only must Joey overcome the drunken unreliability of Beau, the continuing hostility of his stepmother's new husband—the former "cousin"—who pursues him with baleful intent, and the numerous physical obstacles presented by the unrelentingly harsh landscape and social climate of the Texas of about 1885, but he must also learn to overcome the romantic idealism that compels him to continue journeying West in search of the freedom, the boldly heroic men, and the untroubled life he believes lies in wait for his arrival.

The title, Cloudy in the West has great symbolic value. The clouds are the new troubles his romantic expectations of western life really turn out to be. They represent both new physical troubles he must surmount as the Western life turns out as hard as what was left behind and the interior disappointments and frustrations he suffers as his romantic illusions are dispelled.

These interior clouds begin to dissi pate as Joey starts to acquire a more unsparingly realistic vision of the nature of things. This maturing outlook helps him become increasingly able to deal with the hardships and cruel demands of life, including the problem s that forced him to flee the family homestead and some fears that have tormented him since early childhood.

About the Author

Elmer Kelton was born in West Texas in 1926. The place of his birth sounds like a fictional setting: the Horse Camp on the Scharbauer Cattle Company's Five Wells Ranch in Andrews County. His father, R. W. "Buck" Kelton, was a cowboy on the McElroy Ranch, and his grandfather was the ranch foreman. His greatgrandfather had moved to West Texas Cloudy in the West 4523 in about 1876, bringing from East Texas a string of horses with which he intended to become a rancher, but he died early, leaving his four sons to earn their keep as working cowboys.

Elmer Kelton remarks that with such a heritage he should have become a good cowboy himself. Somehow, though, he did not; instead he writes about cowboys and rural life in the West.

Kelton was raised in Crane, Texas, where he graduated from Crane High School in 1942 and then attended the University of Texas in Austin from 1942 through 1944. He left college to serve in the infantry at the end of World War II, married a young Austrian woman whom he met in Europe shortly after the war, returned to college to complete a Bachelor of Arts in journalism in 1948, and started his family of three children with Anna. He became a livestock and farm reporter for the Standard-Times of San Angelo, Texas, and began to write fiction.

Since 1955, while continuing his career as a journalist, he has published more than thirty-five novels, two collections of short stories, several nonfiction historical studies, six chapters in books on Texas and the West, and many introductions and afterwords to books dealing with the American West. His interest in the West stems from his stated beliefs that things are as they are today because things were as they were in the past and that we can learn much about ourselves by studying our history.

Kelton is a six-time winner of the Spur Award for excellence in Western fiction, achieved for his life's work, but mostly garnered on the strength of such classics as The Day the Cowboys Quit (1971), The Time It Never Rained (1973), The Good Old Boys (1978), The Man Who Rode Midnight (1987), and The Pumpkin Rollers (1996). Kelton was recently selected as the greatest Western writer of all time in a survey of members of the Western Writers of America, Inc.

Setting

The setting for Cloudy in the West covers much of Central Texas from Athens down to Austin and then west through the hill country and over the Pecos Frontier to Fort Stockton, but for thematic purposes there are only two scenes in the novel— the Shipman Ranch in East Texas and "The West" of about 1885.

The Shipman Ranch is home for Joey and John Shipman, a place of unremitting hard work, family closeness, and as much security as land and livestock can provide. After Joey's mother died some of this closeness and security faded, but there was still Pa and old Reuben. John Shipman married Dulcie to try to replace Joey's mother, but Dulcie never liked Joey much, nor did she much like the ranch. When both Pa and Reuben die the only security Joey has is the ranch itself, with all its attendant hard work, but even this is threatened. Joey overhears Dulcie tell her "cousin" Blair Meacham that she intends to sell the farm, desert Joey, and move to Waco or Dallas for a less lonely life, and he knows that even the precarious security of the ranch will disappear if she carries out her plan.

Since he is certain that Dulcie is trying to kill him, he determines to escape the perils of his present condition by finding Beau Shipman, his ne'er-do-well cousin.

The romantic freedom of the road leads Joey and Beau on a trek into the legendary freedom of the vast and wild spaces of the far West, the second major setting of the novel. On the road west, Joey and Beau do not have to worry about tormenting bulls, weedfilled corn fields, dangerous stepmothers, nagging sheriffs, or the restrictions that civil law places upon them. Joey is free to ride and drink and "eat canned sardines and tomatoes whenever he felt like it." But the freedom of the west also allows outlaws, hunger, danger, rattlesnakes, cactus spines, wolves, and some downright uncivil cowboys. The West is cloudier than they had known it would be. The setting moves from this cloudy West back to the more secure Shipman ranch.

Social Sensitivity

While many modern books written for or about young people have characters who adopt a relatively nonjudgmental stance concerning human behavior, actions, and characters, Kelton presents a world in which sternly made and definitive judgments of people and life have a necessarily prominent place. Cloudy in the West realistically depicts the harsh, arduous, and even brutal conditions that held sway in the Texas of 1885. To exist in such a setting, unless one were protected by wealth or position of power, was to be forced to deal with the daily draining complications of drought, heat, cold, disease, pestilence, and brute beasts of both animal and human variety. Kelton presents the drama of a young boy trying to grow up faced with this Darwinian struggle for just the fundamentals of life, let alone any gracious niceties. In this setting and under these grueling conditions, some qualities of mind and character thrive and others do not.

Joey Shipman learns that the romantic idealism of youth is ill-suited for success in the face of such obstacles. The ability to make judgments and carry out decisions unclouded by emotions, the opinions of others, and the hostility of circumstances is essential to wresting a good life from the obdurate environment. As he matures, Joey becomes able to make clear judgments about tough situations. Perhaps Kelton's growing up on a ranch in West Texas stripped him of any sentimental notions of the pastoral life.

Joey, the moral and ethical arbiter in the novel, functions somewhat as the chorus does in classical Greek drama, his attitude toward human behavior regularly leading the reader to understand what is acceptable given the nature of the times. Beau's drunkenness causes him frequently to be an unproductive member of a society in which the full strength of every man is needed to improve the collective lot. If he cannot support at least himself, he becomes a burden to those who are working to their utmost capacity. Beau is a hard worker and a decent human being when sober, but he is of no use to anyone, including himself, when his is drunk. After having to discipline Beau for many years, Sheriff Gardner of Bastrop says of him, "His mama ought to've drowned him when he was a baby." Beau, in fact, is quickly drowning himself in drink. Joey, himself in need of help because of his age and inexperience with life, resents having to take care of his useless cousin, and he often considers leaving the drunk and setting off alone. Beau is kin though, and Joey knows what it is like to be alone. Joey uses every means at his disposal to keep his cousin away from liquor, and eventually Beau becomes so concerned with the realities of life that he dare not cloud his thinking with drink.

Nor does Joey sentimentalize the animals that he uses or encounters.

Joey honors Old Taw, his aging and infirm horse, because he has inherited Taw from his father and the horse has always served the family well. Joey tries not to push the animal too hard and cause him unnecessary pain, but when he finds it necessary to use Taw to escape danger, Joey treats the horse like a horse, not a venerated relative.

When he has to sleep near some freight-wagon mules on his way to Bastrop, Joey does not romanticize their hard work and lack of freedom and stroke their sweet heads; he is disturbed to learn that mules snore and keep him awake. He does not treat rattlesnakes and scorpions as anything but threats to his life when he finds them cohabiting his campsite—he promptly kills them. The old Jersey bull that has bedeviled Joey from his earliest days gets no sympathy for being just a beast following its instincts to intimidate and dominate.

When Joey is finally physically able to face the bull, he smacks him in the head with an iron poker. Such is the reality of life in rural Texas in 1885.

Cloudy in the West does address the issues of prejudicial treatment of Blacks and women, though only in an unromantic, realistic manner. Kelton has said in My Kind of Heroes,"... I can use these novels to express my own feelings about prejudice and I try to do so without beating the reader over the head with them." Old Reuben, an aged Black man always considered part of the Shipman family, has sterling moral qualities as clear to Joey as they were to Pa. Dulcie, needing to be better than someone, looks down on Reuben, treating him like the slave he had once been, and Blair Meacham kills him when the old man's devotion to Joey gets in the way of the Meacham plans for the boy's ranch. Joey wants to bury his friend in the family plot alongside his mother and father, but Dulcie refuses, declaring that it was wrong "to bury a black man inside, where white folks lay." Joey does not argue, figuring, "By the time all graves were opened on Judgment day, that fence wouldn't still be here."

Misogyny is another prejudice addressed by Kelton in Cloudy in the West. Dulcie is not an admirable character in the novel, but her role is not just that of a strict stepmother. Whatever pain she suffers in life is bought with her own uncivil behavior. She is shot to death not by Joey, Beau, or one of the sheriffs, but by Blair Meacham, the rogue she married and plotted with. Joey's decision to "bury her by Pa" in the family burial ground because he "won't fight her all the way to the cemetery" is praised by Alta as "a grownup way of lookin' at it." Joey feels his decision is not so much adultlike as rational.

Alta, the only other major female character in the novel, is solidly heroic, adding to Joey's security and to the notion of good order in the West.

She is a prostitute when she first appears in the novel, having been brought from San Antonio to the outlaw camp by the hatched-faced Farlow. Beau initially dislikes Alta because she reminds him of his own mother, who had shown no concept of responsibility toward her son and had instead flung herself into wild partying. Alta is different; she does not run when she might; she stays with Beau after he is bitten by the rattlesnake, tending to all his needs and probably saving his life. Alta explains when Beau is ready to listen that when she was alone, impoverished, hungry, and near death her first thoughts were to survive. Beau, knowing the harshness of life himself, understands that Alta's life was much like his own. Her character is basically moral and strong, and Beau finds that he admires her virtues. When he marries Alta, it is not because of a sentimental desire to rescue some fallen woman from a life of sin, but because he admires her virtues that make her a civilizing force in the world. We are told

that she is a small woman, not quite thirty years old, "but she was strong enough to drag Beau up against the snubbing post." Most men, Alta declares, "think all a woman is good for is to cook and sew and go to bed with." But Beau comes to know Alta as a strong friend — who happens to be a woman.

Literary Qualities

Cloudy in the West is, like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884; see separate entry, Vol. 2), the story of a young boy's difficult journey into maturity. Its narrator is omniscient only where Joey is concerned, is always able to know what Joey is thinking, and never leaves the boy to describe the actions of other characters out of his proximity. Although Beau and Alta are along on the journey and both profit enormously from the experiences encountered on the road, this is Joey's story.

Kelton's imagery—fresh, significant, and consistently appropriate—helps readers understand the narrative by giving them specific mental pictures of the things and scenes described.

Because the narration is primarily from Joey's point of view, many of these images are his. When, for example, Joey sees himself trapped on the ranch after the death of his father —unable to get away because as a child he has no place to go where his needs will be cared for, isolated with people who want to kill him— he sees a fly caught in a spider web and immediately understands the correspondence to his own situation. He regards himself as the fly and Dulcie as the "black widow spider" moving to devour its prey. After old Reuben dies, Joey believes that his friend's death would be a relief to Dulcie, "Like pulling a thorn out of her foot." Even when the images are more appropriate to other characters, it is usually Joey who imagines what they might be thinking. When Joey is observing the brutish Hull, for example, he thinks that "Beau would probably say he was playing poker with a deck short on aces and long on jokers." But Kelton does not restrict his narrator's use of images to Joey.

On Hull, again, the narrator tells us that the outlaw "withdrew into his prickly shell like a porcupine rolling up into a ball with its bristles out."

The very title. Cloudy in the West, denotes the dominant imagery of the novel. The West seems a romantic land to both Joey and Beau, a place of freedom where they can escape the burdens of unending hard work and the personal troubles that haunt them in East Texas. But when they actually experience this land with its fabled characters, they find them greatly different from the myth. Beau discovers that "It's cloudy in the west and fixin' to rain misery."

The novel has a circular form, a seemingly unusual choice for a story whose theme focuses on a journey towards maturity. Kelton's theme is more complex though than that of a simple coming-of-age plot in which a boy starts in one geographic place and moves in direct physical line to another, growing up along the way. Joey is afflicted by a common form of romantic idealism, in his case the fervent belief that the escape to maturity lies somewhere out "west"—both a physical space and an interior landscape—where the problems of home can be left far behind. But the maturity that Kelton advocates is one that involves a realistic recognition that all places, even the West, are clouded with problems. These clouds can't always be evaded by simply moving from place to place. There are clouds of internal illusion and immaturity that must be

dispelled as well. Joey could have faced the clouds at Fort Stockton with Alister Mclntosh, but his roots were where his pa had given him his first lessons about life. The paradox inherent in seeking maturity through conquering new horizons is that the farther away you move from where you began the more needed is the bred-in-the-bone strength of your origins. Joey is enthralled by the idea of the West, but his search for it "Everyday was carrying him farther away from what he had known and loved."

He eventually learns on his dual journey to the West and through his young emotions that he can recognize, confront, and constructively deal in mature fashion with what are the real problems of life when he returns home.

Joey's experience with the bad Jersey bull is the most obvious example of circular form used in the novel. The bull attacks the child in the first chapter and almost kills him; in the last chapter, Chapter 17, Joey enters the pasture to face the bull. This time when the bull charges, the young man stands his ground and smacks the charging bull with a poker, shouting, "Hyahh! Git, you son of a bitch." And the bull "gits." When a grinning Beau chides him as a "boy" for using that kind of language, Joey answers, "And don't you know it's time you quit callin' me boy?"

Themes and Characters

Cloudy in the West is the "coming of age" story of Joey Shipman, only twelve "going on thirteen" as he is fond of adding. He goes to school and works on his pa's ranch, but the work he does is that of a boy. When he hoes weeds in the corn patch, Kelton writes, "His small hands were raw from his angry grip on the wooden handle." The "bad Jersey bull" kept on the Shipman Ranch challenges Joey on a regular basis, and old Reuben warns the boy that "You'd best not agitate that old bull." Joey notices that the bull "seemed to vent its hostility most strongly against youngsters," and that "Pa or Reuben had only to raise a hand and the bull would back off." But with the boy, Joey knew "that the bull would kill him if it could." After the death of all the significant adults in his life, the boy has to grow up in a hurry. He tries to turn to his only close relative for help, but Beau Shipman, although older, is more immature in many ways than Joey. Instead of functioning like a small family where the older member protects the younger, they more resemble two children trying to live in an adult world.

Though John Shipman dies in Chapter 1, he remains an important character in the novel. He serves as the model of mature adult behavior for Joey to emulate. When Joey compares Beau or Miller Dawson or anyone to "Pa," they never measure up. John Shipman was an upright, hardworking man who valued honesty, his family, the dignity of human life, and the proper way to treat animals and tools.

Only the Fort Stockton sheep man Alister McIntosh, who also approached life as a reasonable and compassionate man, reminds Joey of Pa, who remains the image of what a man should be. Joey measures his own and everyone else's conduct by this model.

Old Reuben is, like Pa, a friend and protector of Joey. When John Shipman is near death, he asks Reuben "to look out for Joey." The old former slave has a quiet kind of dignity that causes him to respect virtue and recognize dishonesty. He is a perceptive man who realizes that Blair Meacham is not Dulcie's "cousin," despite their shared story, and he sees behind Blair's slick words and innocent demeanor his criminal intent born of selfishness.

Dulcie and Blair Meacham represent palpable evil in the novel. They accept family life and civil behavior not because they believe in the efficacy of such ordered arrangements but because of what material benefits they can get out of them. Dulcie is a sullen woman not happy living on a ranch with Pa and Joey, though her desire to sell the ranch as quickly as possible after Pa's death is based on more than discontent with a grueling life on the homestead. She feels the good life is not the life one finds in a close family working the land; it is the high life of money and parties. She is not clever enough to hide her feelings, but Meacham is for a long while able to deceive Joey while he positions himself to get the money from the sale of the ranch for himself. He marries Dulcie before he tries to kill Joey, and he almost certainly plans to kill Dulcie after she inherits the ranch. He would then be the next beneficiary. When Joey and Beau return

to the ranch near the end of the story, Sheriff Lawton tells them that Meacham had begun spending time with a rich, young widow in Athens.

Beau Shipman is Pa's cousin, Joey's second cousin. The child of John Shipman's brother and a prostitute, who did not want the child, Beau had no model of family life to emulate. Before Joey found him in the Bastrop jail, where he spent the majority of his time, he was a drunk living in a squatter's shack. He would work only enough to buy whiskey to get drunk on, and then he would be arrested until he was sober enough to be released to earn more whisky money.

His journey west is for him as much a road to maturity as it is for the boy Joey, for in the West he is forced to face the various problems of life directly in ways that will not get him killed.

Beau is fortunate to meet Alta, whose background is very much like his. He at first dislikes her because, like his dissolute mother, she had been a prostitute, and she dislikes him because he had been an abusive drunk, like her father. This enmity changes when Beau understands why she became a prostitute, and she learns why he had become a drunk. After they find that they like each other, they begin to make mature decisions about their relationship that will lead toward stability and happiness. Beau tries to explain to Miller Dawson why he and Alta were no longer fighting: "We got tired of fightin'. It's easier on the digestion if we get along." When Beau asks Joey to be his best man, he says, "He's a little short in years, but he's grown up considerable since we've been together." Joey thinks to himself, however, "We both have."

Miller Dawson is both a hero and a villain in the story, or, more accurately, an almost-hero tarnished with a romantic villainy. He is a notorious murderer, reported to have killed over seventy men, sought by every sheriff and Texas Ranger Joey and Beau run into. But Dawson explains to Joey that he had really killed only three men, and they were the kind that needed killing. Dawson is kind to Joey, protecting him from the brutish outlaw Hull, reminding Joey of the legendary Robin Hood. Joey is drawn to this romantic figure who represents the Wild West: "He was intrigued by the idea of a life free and unfettered in this wild land where the taming hand of civilization had made so little mark." But Dawson is different from Pa, for whom work, and not the dissolute life, was the route to happiness. Instead of a gun, Pa had chosen to earn his keep with "a plow or a hoe or a shovel." Dawson and his way of life make existence in the West cloudy, and Joey sees the cloud very clearly when Dawson is killed.

Several other characters in the novel represent the cloudy West, those problems Joey and Beau face in the often savage life of the uncivilized West.

Miller Dawson's partner in crime, Hull, is a brutish man who respects neither man, woman, nor child and would kill any and all if it suited his purposes. Although both Dawson and Hull are criminals, Dawson is considerably closer to civility than Hull. We are told, "Hull and Dawson were bound together by mutual need, not by any liking for one another." Farlow is another brutish character whose only interests in life are food, whiskey, and submissive women. He is rumored to have killed a woman when he had

tired of her company, and Tolly believes that he intends to kill Alta when he tires of her. Such men as Farlow can exist in the west because of the lack of effective law, the same condition that makes these untrammelled spaces seem attractive to Joey and Beau. Encounters with evil men unchecked by any stronger force gradually make the cousins see clouds in the West.

Some of the lesser clouds in the West are the cattlemen whose brutish behavior makes life unreasonably tougher for gentle men like Alister McIntosh. Tol Evers does not want McIntosh to trail his sheep across what he considers his land, and Old Man Carrington has even more forceful ideas on the subject. Both these men are prejudiced against sheep, even in the face of the rational arguments made calmly by McIntosh. They already have their minds made up and do not care to be confused by the facts.

Only when Old Man Carrington tries to prosecute one of his prejudices, when he tries to drive the sheep across the Pecos River, does he give up and ride away. Sheep can be led, but they cannot be driven like cattle.

Contrasted to the array of uncivil characters Joey encounters in his travels are several minor characters who represent civility in life. Pa, old Reuben, and Alister McIntosh are the major anchors for Joey's journey into maturity. But Joey is also positively affected by several other minor characters. The various sheriffs in the story, for example, do their jobs honestly and with a certain amount of civility toward those they govern.

Sheriff Gardner gives food money to Joey and Beau, although he is not required to, and Sheriff Lawton in Athens goes out of his way to risk his own life to protect Joey from the murderous Blair Meacham. The narrator says of Lawton that ". . . the sheriff accepted his duty like a religious calling." Caspar Tatum, the storekeeper in Bastrop, is another example of a character graced by civility, and he is wise enough to see a quality of character in Beau beneath his drunkeness. He gives Beau food and guides him to do productive work, thus keeping him away from the destructive alcohol.

Topics for Discussion

1. What causes John Shipman's wagon to wreck, killing Pa?

2. How does Reuben know that Blair Meacham is not an honorable man when Joey thinks of him as friendly?

3. Why does Joey go to the trouble to free the fly from the spider web?

4. Why does young Joey take his father's straight razor with him on his journey west?

5. In what ways does Beau need the young boy Joey? In what ways does young Joey need the drunken Beau?

6. Why does Joey not agree with Judge Henry Smith's "swift and terrible justice" for those arrested for crimes?

7. How much of Beau's dissolute life was caused by his father's telling him he would "never amount to nothin"?

8. What causes Miller Dawson to protect Joey from his outlaw partner Hull?

9. Why did Joey's pa not indulge much "in food that came in air tights"?

10. Canned sardines and tomatoes seem to represent the legendary West to Joey. Why?

11. What does Alta learn about Beau when he tells her that he has "never beaten a horse in my life. Or a woman either"?

12. What does the death of Miller Dawson have to do with Beau's and Joey's decision to return to Bastrop and give themselves up?

13. What does the old Jersey bull have to do with Joey's coming of age?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Beau has an ungenerous opinion of lawyers. Was the role of lawyers in the old west different from their role today?

2. Why might the land in and around the Texas Hill Country be more fitting for sheep than for cattle?

3. Most cattle ranchers dislike sheep and sheep men. What does Joey learn about sheep from Alister McIntosh that makes him understand why someone would prefer sheep over cattle?

4. Does the image Joey has of the West as a kind of Sherwood Forest inhabited by Robin Hood and his men prove to be accurate?

5. What was the life of a woman like in the Old West?

6. In what ways did the life of former slaves, like old Reuben, change after they were freed?

7. How important is the concept of civility?

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Related Titles

Most of Kelton's thirty-five novels will be of interest to those who like either the setting or the theme of Cloudy in the West. Kelton is a good novelist who generally avoids "Cowboy and Indian" cliches, and his unsentimental depictions of ranch and cowboy life teach as much as they delight. His deep sense of classical values is apparent when he writes, as he often does, about the roles of civility and its opposite in building independent lives in areas where there was little external support. Such novels as The Day the Cowboys Quit (1971), The Time It Never Rained (1973), The Good Old Boys (1978), The Man Who Rode Midnight (1987), and The Pumpkin Rollers (1996) are among Kelton's best.

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