The Cry of the Halidon Short Guide

The Cry of the Halidon by Robert Ludlum

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

The demand for relentless action in a Ludlum thriller does not favor deep or intense character study. In The Cry of the Halidon only the protagonist, Alexander McAuliff, is given more than a cursory description. Most of the plot follows his point of view. Only sporadically does the story present events from another character's perspective, mainly to increase the suspense by allowing the reader a look behind the scenes.

This simple but effective method accentuates the web of intrigue which surrounds the hero. Of all seven members of the survey team, only McAuliff s old friend, Sam Tucker, does not seem to have a secret agenda for coming to Jamaica. Among the others, the pretty and ambitious Alison Booth, who becomes McAuliff's inevitable love interest, is on the run from Interpol after being entrapped by them in a manner that resembles McAuliff's experience with MI5. The Jensens, an amiable couple in their fifties, are in fact on Dunstone's payroll, planted to spy on McAuliff's moves. James Ferguson, a young vegetation specialist, is also a spy on behalf of the Craft Corporation. Charles Whitehall, a noted Caribbean historian, is in truth a displaced leader of the Jamaican right wing who returns in hope of staging a putsch.

The same kind of deception is evident elsewhere. Julian Warfield, the head of Dunstone, is not the quirky, harmless old man that he initially seems to be but a ruthless 'eliminator' of men who stand in his way. The British Secret Service's top field agent, R. C. Hammond, initially spends a lot of time posing as a financial analyst, while Malcolm, one of Hammond's prized assistants, is in fact a key member of the Halidon.

All of these figures are evoked with such rapid strokes of the pen that they never rise above flat and vapid genre stereotypes (the metaphor is doubly appropriate as, even though he is a skilled typist, the author prefers to write in longhand). Ludlum's typecasting is at times plainly ridiculous, as when he inserts this bit of psychology into McAuliffs thoughts: "All the left-oriented he knew, outside the former Soviet bloc, were humorless; the Jensens were not." It seems that the reader is supposed to conclude that the Jensens could not be left-leaning because they had a sense of humor! The portrayal of Moore and Whitehall, the two contenders for the political future of Jamaica, is equally preposterous. Although Ludlum assures us that both are brilliant, charismatic and eloquent, their actual speeches have the argumentative depth and emotional complexity of Boy Scout debating team leaders. Similarly, the warriors of Acquaba seem a naive blend of the cliches of the noble savage and the myth of Spartan strongmen.

Static and predictable, Ludlum's cast of types serves only as fodder for the narrative engine which drives the plot forward at a neck-breaking speed. On occasion the demands of the plot exact a heavy toll on the consistency in characterization.

The portrayal of Alison Booth, for example, is implausible enough to verge on sexism. We learn from flashbacks that Booth has for long months been working for Interpol. She is a trained veteran (as she proves to McAuliff on several occasions), who has succeeded in her mission in conditions of intense stress and danger. Yet for most of the

novel this brave and experienced woman ends up being chaperoned around Jamaica because of McAuliff's concern for her safety. Never mind that she has survived months of solitary undercover work—going to bed with McAuliff marks an end of her independence, a narrative agent since from that point on Alison will figure solely as a love interest to the hero.

Although McAuliff is the focal personality in the story, even he fails to emerge as a convincing character. In many ways McAuliff is just another name for a stereotypical Ludlum protagonist: single, in his late thirties to early forties, tall and handsome, attractive to women, well educated, independent and independently affluent, with a military background, and a top professional in his field. In The Cry of the Halidon he is a geologist, but the discipline seems almost incidental as McAuliff spends all his time fighting the machinations of Julian Warfield, the novel's sinister equivalent of James Bond's Dr. No. This conventional prescription for a hero yields, predictably, a conventional hero-type, who fails to develop in any interesting way in the course of the novel.

What is the McAuliff type? Although an ex-academic, deep down he is a man of action who disdains desk-bound paper-pushing bureaucrats. An independent thinker, he is suspicious of authority, but extremely loyal to his friends. A bona fide patriot and idealist, he often acts out of profound skepticism about any ideological or political slogans. Like many a lone rider of the western tradition, McAuliff also adheres to an identifiable code of chivalry: He respects women, mistrusts poseurs and sycophants, despises drugs and people who don't oppose drug dealers, takes the side of the underdog, and kills only when necessary. He is, in other words, a bland and plastic figure which is, nevertheless, reincarnated in every Ludlum thriller—perhaps because, as critic Bruce A. Rosenberg puts it, "we want to see such projections of ourselves get the bigger score."

It may be worth noting that Ludlum models and names some of the minor characters in The Cry of the Halidon after real-life people whom he had met during his sojourn on Jamaica. For example, the first character we meet in the story, a young hotel manager named Timothy Durell, has indeed been (in Ludlum's words) "the youngest and brightest manager of a large international resort that I've ever met." Robert Hanley, the Kingston pilot in the novel, has likewise piloted Ludlum in his real-life research around Jamaica.

Social Concerns

Most readers reach for a Robert Ludlum novel to experience the thrill of suspense and the intricacy of international espionage machinations. Others may be drawn to his portrayals of largerthan-life heroes who, against all odds, succeed against labyrinthine networks of deception, corruption and intrigue. Few, however, would expect from Ludlum more than a cursory treatment of social or ideological issues. After all, the author has admitted in an interview: "I don't spend a great deal of time on things that don't move the story."

And yet, on occasion, even a writer as action-oriented as Ludlum is motivated by social rather than entertainment-driven concerns. As he has remarked elsewhere, "I'm fundamentally and merely a storyteller who hopes you enjoy the entertainment, but perhaps will permit me an idea or two." Only a year before The Cry of the Halidon, for example, Ludlum wrote one of his most politically involved thrillers, Trevayne. It describes, in effect, a government within the government, where Congress and even the presidency can be bought and sold in the name of political expediency. There is no mistaking the fire of indignation that animates Ludlum's fictional indictment of a secret Washington conspiracy. "Mendacity! Abuse of Power! Corruption! Police State!'

is how the manifestly still troubled author remembered his reaction to Watergate years after. In 1973, when the full extent of Nixon and Liddy's criminal excesses just became clear, Ludlum gave full expression to his concern about the abuse of power in the murky corridors of party, military, and high finance politicking.

Considering that Trevayne and The Cry of the Halidon were written within one year of each other, it is not surprising that some of the concerns of the Watergate era should also manifest themselves in the latter novel. In The Cry of the Halidon the target is an international gang of big financiers, crooked politicians, and drugtrafficking criminals. Organized in a mega-cartel known as Dunstone Limited, they stoop to outright political manipulation by trying to seize the government of Jamaica. Dunstone plans to capture the riches of the island's interior, sei2e political power, and turn the country into a tax-free haven. Attracting money and power from all over the world, the cartel could then manipulate and destabilize international markets while maximizing its own profits.

Ludlum warns against the economic and political clout of the organization, so formidable that "even Wall Street and Whitehall would tremble," and the fact that it is answerable only to its powerhungry chairman. Much has been made of Ludlum's persistent concern about such high level cabals which operate on the margins, or even completely outside national and international law. Accused of conspiracy mania or even outright paranoia on this subject, the author has always given the same answer: In less than two decades the American government has been infiltrated not once, but twice, by the cliques of Water- and Iran-Gaters who also deemed themselves beyond and above all scrutiny. "This is no longer the age of Aquarius," insists Ludlum, "it's the age of conspiracy." True

to his word, in The Cry of the Halidon, the hero, Alex McAuliff, thwarts the takeover of Jamaica by bringing to light a conspiracy which again involves men of extraordinary stature whose integrity was not debated.

"All that's been truly documented from time immemorial," wrote Ludlum in the Introduction to Trevayne, "is that man . . . . lies to avoid accountability or, conversely, to seize the reins of accountability to such an extent that the social contract between the government and the governed is his alone to write . . . ." This is unmistakably a voice of a writer whose savage critiques of such practices are a measure of his concern. Ludlum is at pains to point out that Dunstone-type corporate giants are everywhere around us, and that their concentrated power and virtual unaccountability invite all kinds of abuses. If, as the adage goes, power corrupts, The Cry of the Halidon is a fictional story of how absolute power can corrupt absolutely.

Even if high level conspiracy and intrigue are Ludlum's perennial betes noires, his concern extends to the social situation in Jamaica itself. This should not, perhaps, come as a surprise, considering that in preparation for the book Ludlum stayed on the island for a long time, meticulously researching its history and culture, as well as its myths and legends.

It is not difficult to recognize in the problems which face the Jamaican people the same postcolonial worries that plague any country in the Third World. Ludlum castigates personal and corporate greed as the seed of the island's social and economic ills. His narrator records the obscene contrast between the slummy, filthy, rat-infested dwellings of its native inhabitants and rows of glittering banks only two hundred yards away. Far from being an isolated scene, such revulsion at the penury which the Jamaicans seem to take for granted, forms a leitmotif of the whole book: social compassion and concern for the victims of postcolonial exploitation.

The blame for such deprivations is put squarely at the door of big trans-national corporations whose anxiety to preserve their lucrative monopolies pushes them to instigate takeovers a la Dunstone Limited. In The Cry of the Halidon the main culprit is the Craft Corporation (a name that cannot but echo the real-life food giant), which, under the tired pretense of boosting the local economy, has been raping Jamaica for generations. Among other things, it is his fury at such brazen greed that galvanizes Ludlum's protagonist into a violent confrontation with Craft's hired goons. Ludlum, who in the past has identified himself as an old-fashioned political liberal, has stated: "What I don't like in the world is largeness—large corporations, large governments." The Dunstone Limiteds which control the fates of local governments, and Craft Corporations which rob the land and its people, are what Ludlum sees as the main obstacle to the emerging nations' full independence.

Techniques

Most critics and reviewers agree that Ludlum thrillers seem "more assembled than written—a little sex here, a lot of violence there, a scattering of irony throughout and more sudden plot twists than seem entirely reasonable." Reading Ludlum has been likened to watching a blacksmith forge a very long chain. The making of the first few links may arrest one's attention since what the author lacks in finesse and artistry he makes up in noise and brute energy, but the only suspense lies in how long he will keep at it. Another reviewer proposed this definition of a ludlum: "a long, turgidly written, frantically overplotted novel, the literary equivalent of seriously wielding a plumber's helper."

If anything, the reception has grown more acerbic over the years. Early reviewers, while not blind to the author's formulaic thrills, appreciated the rapidity of his narration, the inventiveness of intrigue, occasional insights into the workings of intelligence agencies and, always, his talent for entertainment. Yet, as Ludlum's thrillers grew longer and denser, and as his popularity reached new heights, the critics grew exasperated.

They charged that Ludlum's novels were comic books for adults and, multiplying examples of his ponderous style, kept asking for "bags of bread crumbs" to keep track of the impossibly convoluted plot lines.

There is indeed much truth in such scathing critiques. Ludlum's style is, in general, plodding and melodramatic, given to excesses of italics, exclamation marks!, BLOCK LETTERS, and repetition repetition. His heroes are durable and intrepid beyond belief, and his dramatic cast are wax figures straight from Mme Tussaud's. The plots are tortured and contrived, predictably rushing to an obligatory confrontation between good and evil which is always clear-cut.

Compared to the norm of Ludlum's thriller factory, The Cry of the Halidon seems to be slightly better constructed and more coherent with respect to time, action and effect. The novel is divided into four books of roughly equal length, each set in a different geographical location. This progression from London to Kingston, to the North Coast, and finally to the Cock Pit, forms the novel's internal clock which also functions as its structural backbone.

To begin, the progress of the clock in chronological time marks the removal of action from the streets of London to the increasingly more exotic and less predictable island environment. It also marks the shift from merely psychological entrapment to physical violence, which culminates with multiple killings in McAuliffs camp and a series of Halidon assassinations. The progress of the internal clock also parallels the transformation of the protagonist from an academic-turnedsurveyor to an efficient fighter/killer.

Finally, the movement into the island's interior corresponds to the unmasking of the guiles and deceptions of the characters, who are forced to bare their interiors.

The plot of The Cry of the Halidon is, of course, one that Ludlum has been rehearsing with minor variations since the beginning of his career. Its unity is enhanced by the fact that, unlike most of his novels in which events are scattered all over the globe, this one is confined mostly to Jamaica. On the other hand, Ludlum seems to seek a curiously dual genre effect. On one level the book is a spy thriller, partly in the classical tradition of Ian Fleming's James Bond series; on another, it is an exotic adventure story.

Unlikely as this mix may at first appear, it all perhaps comes down to one thing: entertainment potential. Explains Ludlum: "As Bernard Shaw once said, if you want to convince somebody, entertain him. That's what I try to do." A good sign of this is the short and compact chapters, typically ending on a high note designed to generate cliff-edge suspense.

Themes

Throughout the novel several ideas appear with enough regularity and force to warrant their discussion as themes.

The most persistent is Ludlum's misgivings about the potential for high level conspiracy among men of power, including the nation's top elected officials. In The Cry of the Halidon the protagonist combats the united forces of international big business, corrupt politicians and organized crime. In other books by Ludlum the conspiracy (often of global proportions) has involved Fascists, Communists, terrorists, religious fanatics, the Catholic Church, Nazi Germany, the FBI and the CIA, and even American presidents. Clearly it is not any specific alliance that worries the writer, but the ever-present danger from its double dealing members, in contempt of nations' laws and their citizens.

The second theme of the novel flows directly from the first. In their global tugs-of-war, large organizations invariably run afoul of the rights of individual citizens. Whether organized along political, economical, academic, or espionage lines, all conspiracies regard people whose interests fail to coincide with their own as suspect and expendable. Tellingly, Ludlum makes no distinction between the ostensible 'bad guys' and the forces of the law, represented by the British MI5, MI6, and the Interpol. Both sides see individual members of McAuliff's survey team as mere puppets, releasing information to them on the 'need to know' basis even if such reticence might jeopardize lives.

Worse still, the MI5 controls McAuliff in a way which amounts to entrapment. Its members invade his privacy, spy on him, violate his neutrality in their wars, and promise him protection only to abandon him the next moment. At the end of the day, he must fall back only on himself, a solitary and bitter figure in the midst of big players' realpolitik.

The deception and betrayal perpetrated on Alison Booth by the Interpol, and on McAuliff by the British Secret Service, give Ludlum an opportunity to pour Scorn on such cavalier attitudes to truth and moral decency. It appears that in the world where allies can be as dangerous as enemies, the individual must never surrender his or her independence, even at the cost of personal risk or hardship.

In this emphasis on independence Ludlum touches on another, even larger theme: the need for Third World countries to become genuinely independent from their Western 'benefactors.' The leading symbol of such independence is the tribe of Acquaba who choose selfsufficiency and isolation in defiance of big business'interests in developing Jamaica's inner region. They guard their lands, known as the Cock Pit, with a formidable combination of native pride and militant fanaticism. There is no doubt about the novel's sympathies for such independence when it contrasts the destitution and hopelessness rampant in Kingston with the proud affluence of the Halidonites.

Throughout The Cry of the Halidon the narrator also returns to the subject of political struggle on behalf of all Jamaicans. Barak Moore, the local leftist revolutionary, warns

McAuliff: "You will not take this island. Many, many will die, but this island will not be yours." The often evoked slogan about the right to selfdetermination occupies' an important place among the novel's themes. Sympathetic to Moore's grass-root socialism, the narrator hopes, nevertheless, for political balance in the shape of a working alliance with the island's fascisti. Ludlum suggests that the citizens of any country need to take their fate into their own hands rather than surrender it to local political figureheads, frequently controlled by big multinational corporations.

Adaptations

Several Ludlum books have been adapted as films. The best known is Sam Peckinpah's 1982 production of The Osterman Weekend, released by Republic Pictures, and starring Rutger Hauer, John Hurt, and Burt Lancaster. Unfortunately, Ian Master's adaptation and Alan Sharp's screenplay make for a chaotic and implausible story line. The middle part of the movie is recognizable from the novel but a new narrative framework introduced in the exposition and resolution looks forced. Other notable adaptations include NBC's 1977 three-part miniseries, The Rhinemann Exchange, and ABC's more successful The Bourne Identity, the latter directed by Roger Young, and starring Richard Chamberlain and Jaclyn Smith, with supporting roles by Anthony Quale, Peter Vaughan, and Denholm Elliott.

The latest adaptation has been the 1996 two-part TV version of Apocalypse Watch.

Some of Ludlum's tides are available on audiocassettes from Bantam Books, albeit in abridged form. Among these are The Matarese Circle (read by Martin Balsam), The Chancellor Manuscript (by Michael Moriarty), The Bourne Identity and The Bourne Supremacy (by Darren McGavin), The Scorpio Illusion (by Robert Lansing) and Apocalypse Watch (by Edward Herrmann). Readers can also order Ludlum on Ludlutn, a 60-minute cassette where the author takes them behind the scenes of his thrillers. "How has he come to know the secrets of the CIA and the KGB?

Where and why did he learn to write spy thrillers . . . ?" Ludlum answers these and other questions and offers his insights into the world of political intrigue. Finally, die-hard fans can try role playing using Ludlum's Game of Counter-Espionage, available from Spectrum Games.

Key Questions

In The Cry of the Halidon Ludlum effortlessly adopts and adapts all the cliches of a trashy thriller. His narration resembles a downhill race, with the minimum attention to grace and style in an effort to generate the maximum amount of speed and thrill. On the other hand, there is no question that, however obliquely, his novel generates a lot of interesting questions, although almost entirely in terms of theme and social concern, rather than literary or narrative technique. In forming your response to this bestselling book you may wish to consider the following questions.

1. Do you feel that by reading The Cry of the Halidon you have learned anything about the work, technique, and strategies, of real-life intelligence agents?

2. Did you find these central premises of the novel believable: -a worldwide conspiracy foiled by a lone hero?

-a geological team where almost everyone is a spy of sorts? -a secret Jamaican tribe which deals in multiple assassinations?

3. Is Jamaica from the pages of the novel the place that you recognize from the news? In this sense, do you think that the book has remained topical during the intervening decades?

4. Is the only important female character, Alison Booth, convincingly drawn and a full participant in the plot's events?

5. On the whole, did you find the author's portrayal of the Acquaba tribe credible or too Utopian?

6. How would you categorize this book: is it a spy novel? A political thriller?

An adventure story? A crime fiction? Any mixture of the above?

7. How does The Cry of the Halidon compare to other espionage thrillers, or to other books by Ludlum? What would be the best criteria for comparison?

8. Ludlum claims that he is mainly an entertainer who occasionally indulges in an idea or two. Does your reading experience correspond to the author's selfassessment?

9. Ludlum's publishers advertise that his books have sold well in excess of two hundred million copies worldwide. How do you account for such tremendous popularity across all geographic, cultural, or even ideological lines?

10. Do you appreciate The Cry of the Halidon differently now that it has been released under Robert Ludlum's wellknown name, compared to the 1974 book by a completely unknown Jonathan Ryder?

Literary Precedents

The Cry of the Halidon contains all the requisite elements of the genre made famous by the 007 books and films. The exotic locale is Jamaica, as is the first Bond film, Dr. No. There is the obligatory Secret Service agent equipped with a license to kill and electronic gadgetry, an ego-maniacal malefactor bent on dominating the world, a powerful and evil organization of which he is Number One, and victims who get eliminated while trying to expose the latter's evil schemes.

There is the single, unmarried, and charismatic hero who, like Bond, is an improviser, frequently in contravenience of routine methods and 'proper' channels of the law, as well as the inevitable damsel in distress who succumbs to his charms.

There are also car chases, gun and fist fights, and spectacularly contrived assassinations; and, at the end, the climactic race against the clock to free the girl from imminent danger.

Strikingly, Ludlum's novel also anticipates many elements of what Steven Spielberg later brought together in an Indiana Jones subgenre. The hero is a white academic and man of action, who is allowed inside a super-secret tribe. The novel abounds with ancients legends and records, secret searches and buried treasures, coded instructions and lethal adversaries in the quest. There is gold, and lots of it; an ancient mummified corpse which, in a magical moment, seems to come back to life; there are mysterious but empowering tribal powwows and rituals; and, of course, more supernatural phenomena, such as the Halidon "cry."

In a book which ostensibly is a spy story, Ludlum describes what must clearly be a case of voodoo ventriloquism, for although the cry of the Halidon is an earpiercing assault which afflicts terrible physical pain, it cannot be heard even "a few hundred yards away."

Such magical elements appear incongruous in a tale set within the conventions of espionage realism. Ludlum's mix of Bond and Indiana Jones background seems arbitrary, especially when compared to a more effective treatment of spy lore and local color by other writers such as Helen Mclnnes. Writes Mclnnes: "The background of my novels is accurate as I can make them.... the places I describe—-are . . . the countries I visited, customs and people I have seen." The author of The Cry of the Halidon concurs: "the things I experienced [in Jamaica]...

gave rise to whole scenes, composite characters . . . ." On balance, however, Mclnnes's more literary style and a characteristic dignity of narration are more conducive to a sustained evocation of local color.

It is clear that Ludlum does not have the literary and satirical flair of Graham Greene, the unerring instinct for spy psychology of Le Carre, or even the gift for description of

Mclnnes. But perhaps such comparisons miss the point. Ludlum's formula for a spy story has been spectacularly successful and established for him a secure niche in the thriller market. Readers hooked on kaleidoscopic and roller coasting narration, where events succeed each other with the speed of bullets shot from a Graz-Burya automatic, will always snap up his latest offering. Moreover, some of the worst stylistic excesses from his earlier books have gradually attenuated over the years. Ludlum seems to have smoothed out his staccato feature-writing style, crammed as it used to be with pages of rhetorical questions and one-sentence paragraphs.

(His revision process typically consists of two drafts and a final polish.)

Implicit comparisons to Dickens or Thackeray aside, Ludlum is apopular and a populist writer who measures his success by how much sleep his readers are prepared to lose in order to find out what happens next. If his phenomenal selling figures (over 200,000,000 copies of his books worldwide) are anything to go by, he has consistently proven his unmatched excellence in this task. The almost anecdotal admission by a Washington Post reviewer of The Bourne Identity (1980) captures this point without fail: "It's a lousy book. So I stayed up till 3 a.m. to finish it."

Related Titles

In 1971 Robert Ludlum wrote a good, original, fast paced thriller—his first.

Since then, as with each successive Bond production, there has been something oxymoronic about calling each successive novel "new." The form of a "Ludlum" has not changed in the quarter century since the first novel. Rapid pace, high tension, frequent change of locale, minimum characterization, are all designed to give the reader a maximum bang for his buck. The writer tacitly acknowledges this by quoting in "Ludlum on Ludlum" from John Leonard's review in The New York Times: "Mr. Ludlum stuffs more surprises into his novel than any other six-pack of thriller writers combined."

Over the years Ludlum's books have changed, nevertheless, in one obvious respect: They got steadily longer. The recent ones are almost twice the size of those from the early 1970s, with Apocalypse Watch (1995) reaching 751 pages. In November 1997 Ludlum published a sequel to The Matarese Circle entitled The Matarese Countdown. The author has never kept his readers too long without a fix; on average he published a novel every year until 1980, and has published one every two years since.

His first thriller, The Scarlatti Inheritance (rejected no less than ten times before World published it in 1971) initiated a sofar uninterrupted string of best sellers, some presciently exploring themes which would subsequently become the focus of public scrutiny. The Scarlatti Inheritance, for example, was based on the premise that American business interests may have financed Hitler's Third Reich. The Osterman Weekend (1972) raised the specter of illicit CIA domestic operations, and The Matlock Paper (1973) wondered about possible ties between campus drug trade and organized crime. The Rhinemann Exchange (1974) described the long-rumored exchange of strategic materials between wartime Germany and the Allied countries. Three years later, The Chancellor Manuscript (1977)—probably the most original among Ludlum's scenario— chilled everyone by speculating whether J. Edgar Hoover (whom the author deems as "a political first cousin to Adolf Hitler") may have been killed in order to put an end to his control of people incriminated in his private files.

Still, as even a cursory comparison between these novels reveals, Ludlum subscribes to the old dictum: "If it ain't broke, don't tinker with it." Behind each new premise always lies the old plot. It stars an innocent American who stumbles across a power-hungry conspiracy and single handedly saves the day (and often the world), usually resorting to spectacular violence. Each "new" hero is fashioned with the same cookie-cutter, which seems to be modeled on the author himself. Wealthy and university educated, tall and physically fit, an ex-soldier or Marine, and a liberal—the similarity may be more than coincidental as Ludlum admits to "act out all of the characters as [he's] writing them."

This picture of a perfect best seller assembly-line would not be complete without mentioning the exceptions, starting with Trevayne and The Cry of the Ha/idon. Both appeared under the pseudonym of Jonathan Ryder, a combination of the name of Ludlum's second son and his wife's stage name (Michelle Ryder) from her acting days

in New York. This cloakand-dagger approach was suggested by the publishers who feared that writing two books a year would earn Ludlum the reputation of a hack. This sounds strange since, at least next to Ludlum's other novels from 1973 and 1974, both Trevayne and The Cry of the Halidon seem more daring and innovative. The former, for example, is the only thriller which ends in a painful compromise rather than in a clear victory for the hero, while the latter unveils its tale of espionage within the framework of an exotic adventure story.

The other of Ludlum's noms deplume is Michael Shepherd, credited for his 1975 spoof of the thriller genre, The Road to Gandolfo. The plot of this novelistic experiment is outrageous and amusing, and involves the kidnapping of one of the most powerful men on earth, who just happens to be the pope. In its turn towards parody The Road to Gandolfo stands out among the usually serious tone of the espionage genre, even though it is hardly in the class of Graham Greene's Our Man in Havana (1958). Although "convinced it is a truly staggering premise which will serve as the spine of a truly staggering tale," Ludlum achieves mixed results at best, letting his comedy slip too quickly into a farce.

The one novel in Ludlum's oeuvre which deserves more credit and recognition is his 1992 sequel to the first spoof, The Road to Omaha. A genuine exception among Ludlum's books, this comedy thriller is not only well-plotted and hilarious, but also—and not just by Ludlum's standards—well written. The comic mode seems to keep Ludlum away from many of his stylistic and narrative excesses. The conventions which often feel artificial in a serious thriller—e.g., the final showdown between the hero and the crook, or the need to keep the hero alive even at the cost of deus ex machina solutions—now fit perfectly the nonviolent and integrative character of a comedy. The frantic and overplotted action of a typical Ludlum thriller finds a perfect framework in a madcap and hilarious parody, reminiscent of many Blake Edwards movies.

The cast of characters is wide and varied, and, like in a good Elizabethan comedy, introduced as dramatic personae at the beginning of the book. All are quirky without being contrived, funny without sounding forced, and consistent without being predictable. They are embodiments of their classical dramatic types who transcend and enrich the original model. MacKenzie Hawkins, the prime mover and shaker in the book, is a pure comic gem. A comparison with The Road to Gandolfo reveals the extent to which the earlier version of this character was only a sketch (or, conversely, the extent to which Ludlum has improved as a writer). The Hawk from 1992 is a dynamic, engaging and hilarious creation who is unlike any other Ludlum protagonist. The Road to Omaha is a great piece of comic (but no less serious) satire which describes how the maverick general and his motley retinue take up the cause of native Indian rights—and win, exposing on the way all that is wrong with the nation and its government.

Copyright Information

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