

A Distant Trumpet Short Guide

A Distant Trumpet by Paul Horgan

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Characters

Matthew Hazard, who received his commission from West Point in 1880 and is assigned to duty at Fort Delivery in the Arizona Territory, "the best one-troop post in the West," cherishes a high sense of vocation instilled in him by none other than Abraham Lincoln himself; he has the strength of character to pursue his goal and prevails against the hostility of his fiancée's parents to marry the woman he loves. Hazard is brave, conscientious and coltishly appealing, but he is somehow less than an epic figure. This deficiency prompted T. F. Curley to regret that *A Distant Trumpet* had not been longer in order to achieve a more satisfying characterization of its hero.

White Horn, a Chiricahua Apache who becomes a scout for the U.S.

Army, is the stuff of legend and is probably the most interesting character in the book. As a youth he worked hard to become a warrior, went on raids, killed and mutilated his victims in the accepted fashion and was seen as a possible chief for his village. But when he is captured and faces the choice of death or conversion to scout for the white man, White Horn opts for scout. While Hazard and White Horn are on a mission together, White Horn is injured by a poison arrow and when Hazard risks his own life to tend the wounded Indian, White Horn's devotion to his savior is total.

Tall, gaunt, white-bearded Major General Alexander Upton Quait is an elderly but resourceful ascetic generally sympathetic with the plight of the Indians. He quotes Tacitus to his men in the original Latin, speaks Apache to White Horn and Rainbow Son and is so uniquely drawn that, according to one reviewer, he deserves to take his place alongside Leatherstocking, Huckleberry Finn, and Captain Ahab. In the eyes of Matthew Hazard, General Quait is one of the greatest soldiers and most remarkable men that the country has ever had.

Social Concerns

A Distant Trumpet dramatizes the federal government's treatment of the Indians in the Southwest by examining the conscience and idealism of a young lieutenant of the 1880s. When in the final pages of the book the lieutenant refuses a medal of honor and resigns his commission because his loyal Indian scout has been exiled to Florida and redress is said to be impossible, Horgan makes his final statement about the unfairness of that policy.

Techniques

The novel follows individual careers that converge at Fort Delivery during the days of the final Apache defeats, and backtracks whenever a new character appears. Thus as soon as Fort Delivery hears that Colonel Hiram Prescott is about to arrive, the narrator switches back to Batavia, New York and to a Civil War hospital in Washington, D.C.

to trace Prescott's history. Then Hiram meets Jessica Dryden and again Horgan backtracks to flesh out Jessica's history. Another feature of Horgan's style is his use of reverie to describe an actual occurrence. Kitty Mainwaring's lavish fantasy of seducing Matthew Hazard anticipates the actual seduction. In the case of deserter Private Cranshaw who dies a thousand deaths before suffering his actual punishment, the narrator ends the description of his horrendous daydream — he is branded on the hips with a "D" for deserter — by omnisciently revealing that this is indeed exactly what did happen that morning.

Horgan incorporates dialogue and narrative in roughly equal proportions — although he was faulted by at least one reviewer for his "excess of comment" — and quotes "documentary" material such as letters, army reports and especially in the final pages, long passages from General Quait's Autobiography, which a footnote alleges to have been published in Philadelphia in 1892. The large cast of characters is generally well handled; but some of the situations are melodramatic, as when White Horn rides off heroically to fetch the doctor who will save the life of Hazard's ailing newborn child.

Themes

Horgan explores the nature of duty and the varying capacity of human beings to love each other. So committed is Lieutenant Hazard to his duty that when one of his men deserts on a particular mission, he feels as if he were the victim of a betrayal "like a betrayal in love." Matthew Hazard is exemplary in his devotion to duty, until the climactic moment when he must instead be faithful to his conscience.

The figure and myth of Abraham Lincoln, references to whom appear at both beginning and end of this novel, and the values of kindly strength, fatherliness and patriotism associated with him in American history, loom large here. As a child growing up in Indiana, Matthew Hazard races after a campaign train with Lincoln aboard, and for his efforts is given a nearby captain's blue kepi, along with the presidential suggestion that he attend West Point when he grows up. These serve as the motivations for the destiny Hazard pursues.

Another main theme evident in the novel's many intertwined stories is love, which in fact prompted one reviewer to remark that he would have preferred less domesticity and more Indians. There are instances of smothering parent-child love; self-love; stable and unstable conjugal love; adulterous love; General Quait's love for his niece; love of comrades in the heat of battle; and love born of gratitude such as the devotion that the scout White Horn develops for Matthew Hazard once the lieutenant saves the Indian's life.

Adaptations

Directed by Raoul Walsh, the 1964 film version of *A Distant Trumpet* starred Troy Donahue and Suzanne Pleshette. It was dismissed as "clicheridden" and "a dull cavalry Western" by critics.

Literary Precedents

One likely inspiration for *A Distant Trumpet* as a historical novel of the Southwest is Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), whose fictional Bishop Latour representing the real-life Juan Bautista Lamy (1814-1888) would provide Horgan with the subject of his 1975 biographical study *Lamy of Santa Fe*. The 1930s, the decade of Horgan's emergence on the literary scene, was the heyday of the historical novel; this trend continued through the 1940s and in the middle 1950s MacKinlay Kantor's Civil War-era novel *Andersonville* made the best seller lists for two consecutive years.

Because General Alexander Quait is based roughly upon the career of General George Crook (1829-1890) and *Rainbow Son* represents Geronimo (1829?-1909), Horgan duly appends a bibliography of nonfiction sources that gave him pleasure and instruction for the "task of many years" which the novel represents. These include such works as *On the Border with Crook* (1891) by John G. Bourke, *Personal Recollections and Observations* (1897) by Nelson A. Miles, and *Specimen Days in America* (1882-1883) by Walt Whitman.

Horgan dedicated *A Distant Trumpet* to Colonel and Mrs. Livingston Watrous, who he says shared with him in 1946 the family anecdote that eventually took the shape of his full-fledged novel.



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