

# Emperor of America Short Guide

## Emperor of America by Richard Condon

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.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Emperor of America Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>



# Characters

The main character of *Emperor of America* is Chay Appleton, whose sense of right and wrong was perverted by his rapaciously greedy mother. At the age of five, Chay was sent to a military school in Alaska. In her own memoirs, Chay's mother asserts that the four-year-old Chay relentlessly badgered her and his father to be sent away to military school. She tells of him abandoning her at age five. She is a chronic liar. In fact, Chay was underfoot, so as a matter of convenience, he was packed off and kept in military schools all the way through West Point. Chay deeply yearned to please his parents; while young, his mother had impressed on him that his goal in life should be to earn a large pension for his retirement.

He took this advice to heart. Even though he is a brilliant military leader who frequently saves the world from evil armies, he views each success only in terms of how it will fatten his future pension.

Chay is patterned after Napoleon Bonaparte. Like Napoleon, he becomes famous for wearing his hat sideways; only in Chay's case, the hat is a homburg, which comes to symbolize his military genius. Chay eventually subverts American republican government and makes himself emperor. Like Napoleon, at his coronation ceremony, he crowns himself, instead of allowing his brother the Pope to do so. In spite of the parallels with Napoleon, nearly everything about Chay except for his military skills is made to appear ridiculous. His coronation ceremony is rendered insanely funny by the bickering among his relatives about who must hold the train of his wife's robe during the ceremony. His family resents her because she is little more than a prostitute in the pay of the CIA; he must threaten and bribe them to fulfill their parts in the ceremony. The figure of Chay is a caricature; he symbolizes the rapacious greed of America's military leadership, and he never becomes more than a comic symbol.

Chay's family is also symbolic. They are a caricature of a first family — the family of the ruler of America. Serena, Chay's mother, is utterly evil; a lust for money motivates her every action. She has abused and bullied her children until they are afraid to act for themselves, fearing that they may bring down her wrath upon them. Even Chay has trouble resisting her. She wants to turn Chay's battlefield into money, and she unceasingly badgers him to quit the army and become a movie actor; she lines up million-dollar offers from motion picture studios. Serena's emphasis on money helps create immoral children who have no ethical center to their lives. Her children believe that looting and stealing is good and right.

Chay has few qualms about using his military power to make one of his brothers Pope. The novel depicts religion as having become debased. It has become ecumenical, with the Pope no longer presiding over the Roman Catholic Church, but over a variety of faiths that now worship money.

While Chay's family is looting America, Wambly Keifetz, one of the world's richest men, is using his power to legalize and import cocaine. It is he that actually runs America; in



reality Chay is his lackey. Via television, he convinces Americans that cocaine is good, because the taxes generated by its sale will pay off the federal government's deficit. He plans to make America a nation of drug addicts, with himself controlling the supply. Keifetz is a somewhat more rounded character than the novel's other figures, but he still functions more as a symbol than a realistic character. He represents the "owners" of America, who, the novel contends, really do run the country.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Emperor of America, Condon presents a typically bleak picture of American life and politics. This tale of "the owners of the country" details how they use the United States to satisfy their rapacious greed. The most evil of the wealthy owners of America is Wambly Keifetz, who uses a nuclear bomb to destroy Washington, D.C., and nearly every government official. His scheme is to leave the American people with only one choice for a leader, Caesare "Chay" Appleton, a war hero.

Since the age of five, Chay has been in military schools and then the army, rendering him extraordinarily naive about how civilian society functions.

He is motivated by greed and easily manipulated by Keifetz, who promises him a big pension, Chay's one clear goal in life.

Keifetz uses television to manipulate the American people. Throughout the novel, Condon asserts that Americans live in an unreal world cynically created by television networks. In Emperor of America, Americans believe anything they see on television. The networks are only too happy to oblige Keifetz by making Chay into the world's most famous war hero, because war heroes bring good ratings. Condon portrays gullible Americans, who eagerly participate in their own victimization if television encourages them to do so. Chay murders hundreds of thousands of dissenters, yet Americans think he is a great man. A heroic general, who opposes Chay and Keifetz and tries to save American democracy, is not only gunned down by Chay and his followers, but he is then transformed by television into a national hero who was a Chay supporter all along.

In the world of Emperor of America, the nation is run by a wealthy few for their own benefit. Unyielding in his harsh view of America, Condon provides no positive ending. After Chay's career is destroyed and the republic is restored, Americans elect Keifetz President of the United States; the greatest mass murderer in American history is elected leader because television has portrayed Keifetz as a self-sacrificing reformer who is reluctant to participate in politics.

Throughout Emperor of America, parallels are drawn between the careers of Chay and Keifetz and President Ronald Reagan. This becomes a wearisome aspect of the novel because Condon has said all he has to say about Reagan early in the book. The novel asserts that President Reagan was merely a creation of television; characters in the novel admire him for his mastery of the television coverage of events. For instance, he is considered the master of "the wave" — his ability to wave his hand from different positions at nonexistent audiences behind cameras is imitated because it gives the impression that the waver is followed by admiring crowds. According to Condon, the Reagan administration was thoroughly corrupt; he frequently cites statistics to show that administration officials were indicted for numerous crimes. Chay, Keifetz, and others display a thorough contempt for the American people because Americans were supposedly aware that Reagan was helping "the owners of the country" loot the treasury and steal from taxpayers, yet they still loved him.



Hence, the main characters of the novel commit a multitude of heinous crimes, convinced that if they put the proper face on the crimes for television, then Americans will admire them. Crimes supposedly committed by Reagan and his followers are extolled in loving terms by characters in the novel, as if the crimes were admirable.

The policies of the Reagan administration are ridiculed throughout the novel, providing a great deal of humor.

For instance, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua is portrayed as a great military power bent on conquering the world. The novel opens with a Nicaraguan invasion of Portugal, and Chay often must lead the forces of the free world against Nicaraguan invasions. At various times, Nicaragua has controlled Iceland, parts of Europe, and eastern Australia. The satirical point of exaggerating Nicaragua's threat to world peace is to suggest that in real life, Nicaragua was made by the Reagan administration to seem much more dangerous than it really was. In the process of presenting such obvious mockeries of American foreign policy, Condon works in more subtle criticisms. For instance, while depicting the nonsensical efforts of Nicaragua to rule the world, he points out a unique weakness in American military policy: Unlike other nations, America conducts battles with a corporate command; no one person or branch of the military creates and conducts battle plans. In order to satisfy each branch of the military, every action must be agreed to by representatives of the army, air force, navy, and marines. This results in long delays while every decision is routed through military headquarters in the United States — even if the war is in Europe. Even if a battle is fought entirely on land, the navy must be consulted. Condon suggests that this cumbersome organization was responsible for unnecessary loss of life in America's real-life invasion of Grenada, as well as in the Vietnam War.



# Techniques

Emperor of America is a satire. As such, it exaggerates the weaknesses of its subjects so that readers can see what Condon thinks are the real ills in American society. A satire can be a gentle work, such as a newspaper column by Art Buchwald that through mild comedy suggests that politicians or military leaders do not know what they are doing. On the other hand, a satire can be a sharply bitter commentary on corruption and other social evils. Authors of such bitter satires seldom have large audiences; their commentary is too bleak for most readers' tastes. Readers also often resent seeing people like themselves portrayed as gullible fools or outright evildoers. Condon is a rare writer of bitter satire because he has been consistently popular for over thirty years.

He probably retains a large audience because his satire is not just bitter, but often uproariously funny.

Although Emperor of America is not his best novel and its satire tends to drag in its middle section, it has the strength of Condon's style. Condon excels at ridiculous descriptions. For instance, he allows Chay to design his own military uniforms so that he may appear in some scenes with bizarrely tailored, multicolored uniforms, with rows of medals on the left side. These medals glow like Christmas tree lights, and they weigh so much that the small Chay must counterbalance them with weights hidden in the right side of his uniform. His figure is topped with the sideways homburg, creating a notably funny picture.

Another important source of humor in Emperor of America is the way Condon plays on the reader's expectations.

For instance, the serious tone of the opening chapter's description of the combat in Portugal suggests that the battle is a serious threat to Europe. The seriousness is soon exploded by the outrageous assertion that Nicaragua is invading Portugal. The great enemy of the Western World is not the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact; it is the tiny nation of Nicaragua, which flings its military might haphazardly around the world, creating terror wherever it goes.

An interesting technique in Emperor of America is Condon's use of an imaginary voice for the narrator. The narrator is every bit as much a creation of Condon's imagination as Chay and Keifetz. The story is told by a historian who admires Chay and treats him as a great leader, the way some real-life historians treat Napoleon. The narration is highly ironic; while the narrator discusses Chay and Reagan in admiring tones, his descriptions actually imply that they were evil. To enhance the impression of an historian writing about Chay long after his death, the narrator quotes passages from other Chay biographies, as well as passages from diaries and letters. The narrator's silly commentary and inability to draw the logical conclusion that Chay, Keifetz, and their co-conspirators are vile, detestable people, provides a subtle but clear criticism of historical writing.



His blindness to Chay's crimes parallels actual historical treatments that portray Napoleon or other such leaders as heroic figures, playing down the misery they brought to millions of people.





## Key Questions

Emperor of America presents Condon's typically contemptuous view of America and Americans. Its nasty portrayal of America is likely to put off some discussion group members. On the other hand, it is a satire with numerous issues worthy of discussion. Just how much does television actually shape American's views of their country, themselves, and events? What is the primary source of political power in the country? Is America's military selfdestructive?

1. Condon seems to loath Ronald Reagan. Was Reagan worthy of such hatred? Did he commit any of the crimes Condon attributed to him?
2. How valid are the novel's criticisms of America's military command structure?
3. Has the narrative's reliance on topical issues such as America's onetime preoccupation Nicaragua's communist government dated the novel so much that its satire no longer has meaning?
4. There is a coldness, an inhumanness, to the depictions of characters.

Does making them symbols rather than well-rounded figures harmed the novel? Do their portrayals make the narrative uninviting?

5. How well does Condon's comedy work in Emperor of America? When is he funniest? When does the humor fall flat?
  6. There are few noble characters in the novel. Who are they? What happens to them?
  7. Chay's mother is a monster who relentlessly mangles the lives of her children. What is Condon commenting upon with this portrayal? Does it represent a hatred of mothers, or is he trying to satirize something?
  8. What are the novel's criticisms of American business practices? Are they valid? Does it offer alternatives to the problems it portrays?
  9. Is there anything good about the United States presented in Emperor of America?
  10. Is the conclusion satisfying?
  11. How closely has Condon tied events to those of the life of Napoleon?
  12. What are the novel's objections to how history is presented to people?
- Are constructive changes to the teaching of history possible?

## Literary Precedents

Bitter, heavy-handed social satire has a long history in Western literature. Juvenal was an Ancient Roman writer whose views are similar to those of Condon. His *Satires* savage the corrupt politics of Rome and suggest that society as a whole has become a participant in its own victimization. Condon's writing is also reminiscent of the biting humor in Jonathan Swift's satiric fantasy *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Condon creates a fantasy world for Emperor of America; historical events are twisted and changed, making the world of the novel a caricature of reality. Swift used these same techniques. In *Gulliver's Travels* the Lilliputians go to war over whether a soft-boiled egg should be opened from the fat end or the narrow end, showing that the reasons for waging war are often ridiculous. Swift also shows the Lilliputians abandoning their children to boarding schools until they are grown, satirizing a common practice in Swift's day. Condon, like Swift, uses a fantasy society to represent a real one.

# 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 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994