The Golden Age Short Guide

The Golden Age by Gore Vidal

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

The cast of characters in this novel is practically endless. The list is comprised of both real-life and fictional participants, including Gore Vidal himself, who makes an appearance at a party thrown by Peggy Guggenheim. Historical figures are brought into fictional being and no doubt enriched by Vidal's experiences meeting the denizens of Washington through his grandfather, Senator Thomas P. Gore. The two main characters of the novel, Caroline and Peter, are fictional, but most everyone with whom they interact are historical figures.

The interaction that Vidal presents between real-life and make-believe allows him to play with history and fill in all the juicy bits that we always imagined were there, but which are left out of the history books.

Caroline, a former movie star and a former publisher, allows Vidal to look at both worlds, Hollywood and Washington, with ease. Equally at home in the White House as she is in the very luxurious Beverly Hills Hotel, formerly a participant in both spheres, and now an outside observer by choice, she provides an interesting outlook on the power plays that go on around her. She is more at home in France than in America and while she is forced to remain in the U.S. because of the war, she makes the most of her status as an outsider allowed on the inside of the circle of power. As she moves through the sometimes dangerous waters of Washington and its rumor mill, her age becomes her guide. She holds her emotions and feelings in check, playing the game artfully, perhaps because she no longer needs to play it; it is only for her own amusement that she is even present. She is witty and wry, offering silent commentary for the drama that goes on around her. She pleases herself with her uncompromised view of the very compromising life of Washington politics. She takes everything in stride, including death and despair, and only occasionally breaks down, and only within her own mind. She seems to have the sanity that is sometimes lacking in those around her. She is the voice of reason, which is sometimes ignored, as when Blaise wishes to put his daughter Enid in a sanitarium so his son-in-law can have a clear path into politics. Caroline is true to her feelings. She does not pretend to like her daughter; she in fact, openly despises her, most especially (and perhaps most understandably), when Emma marries Caroline's ex-lover, Timothy Farrell. The strained mother-daughter relationship between Caroline and Emma seems to typify most parent-child relationships in this novel: Blaise feels closest to and enjoys the company of his son-in-law more than his own son or daughter; Enid has a child that is cared for mainly by a nurse; and Caroline seems most at home with her nephew, Peter.

Peter is a kindred spirit to Caroline. He, too, is inside the circle of power because he is the son of the wealthy and powerful (within the publishing world, at least) Blaise Sanford. But his heart lies outside the world of greed and the desire to be on Capitol Hill. This is evidenced by his publication of a leftist newspaper after the war, which of course, puts him on the list of suspicious characters issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It is his newspaper, The American Ideal, that Peter feels most connected to, and it is because of this paper that he continually refuses his father's offers to take

over the Tribune. He is independently minded and a conscious observer of the interplay between characters around him. In the second half of the book, he becomes intensely interested in the concept of an "American Ideal" and goes searching for it. One of the places in which he believes he might have found something close to the American Ideal is New York where he meets the likes of Ferdinand Leger, Tennessee Williams, and Leonard Bernstein. It is here that Peter begins to discover the younger artists and thinkers who are looking to change the shape of American culture after its stagnation during the war. Peter, at this point, seems to join this group, with people like Vidal himself, who find they are seeking a new voice as the generation maturing after the war. By juxtaposing his young self in print with his older self as author, Vidal creates a continuity that one could take as a kind of optimism.

Social Concerns

Firmly positioned in a time in which the public's "right to know" is a hotly debated topic and presidential personal matters are assumed to be open for general observation, Gore Vidal looks back to a time in which politics were not assumed to be open and decisions were made for the citizens of the United States, not by them.

Vidal presents an interesting look at what many have termed the "golden age," the 1940s and early 1950s. He concentrates on the two power centers of the United States at the time, Hollywood and Washington, D.C., with an emphasis on the latter.

The novel includes a great many characters, but the story centers around two people in particular: Caroline Sanford (former movie actress and former owner/publisher of a Washington paper, the Tribune) and her nephew, Peter Sanford (son to Caroline's half-brother, Blaise Sanford, the current owner/publisher of the Tribune). Caroline is an intimate of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his circle, most especially Harry Hopkins, who is considered to be FDR's other half and right-hand man. Harry courts Caroline throughout the story, but she insists that she is not up to caring for the sickly Harry; in spite of her refusals, their friendship remains steadfast. Peter, her nephew, is not a politician, but a journalist, working for his father and the Tribune, but often not agreeing with his father's opinions. Vidal tells the story of Washington in the forties through the vantage points of Caroline and Peter, both of whom are simultaneously inside and outside of the circle of power.

Although the common citizens of America are not of primary interest in the lives of the people of Vidal's story, their well-being makes up one particular focus of the novel.

Peter and Caroline frequently (but on separate occasions and not to each other) question the effects that certain moves by Washington's power brokers will have on the health of the general public. Vidal questions why the people of the United States would allow so much power to be invested in those who are quite obviously using and abusing that power. The answer seems to be found within the stop-at-nothing tactics that these manipulators of public opinion employ. It seems not to be a matter of Americans' gross ignorance, or charming naivete, but rather a vested interest that Americans have in their own well-being.

The rebound from the Depression is what the country wanted; it is what the country got, so Roosevelt stays in power until he dies. Vidal does raise interesting questions about Roosevelt and his "dictatorship" as some detractors call it. This novel presents the other side of American politics and so in this way, the reader gets to see one version of what really went on at this time. Vidal manages to intertwine what did happen with what might have happened so smoothly and seamlessly that one begins to wonder what happened that we do not know about, and questions what we do know. Conspiracy theories abound on all sorts of topics, and the events at Pearl Harbor are touched upon here. In this novel, a few anti-Roosevelt characters present "evidence" that FDR and the

members of his cabinet provoked the Japanese into attacking, knew when the attack would occur, and purposely failed to properly warn commanders at Pearl Harbor.

Vidal subtly includes many of the issues and difficulties facing the country throughout this decade, including sentiments that were felt by the politicians and the public throughout this time period. The debate over isolationism or entry into World War II during Roosevelt's campaign against Wendell Wilkie, the controlling of votes and constituencies by certain "bosses," Asa Philip Randolph's threatened march on Washington economic legislation, the war itself, the Truman doctrine, anti-Roosevelt feelings, anti-Truman feelings, and the Communist scare are all issues that make an appearance in the novel, some more fully than others. Vidal presents his story over the backdrop of history, which is never left entirely out of the story. It often takes a backseat, which Vidal might argue is most often the case in real life, even if we know we are currently becoming part of history.

The novel presents an interesting way of looking at the events of this period; it brings to life many of the events that in other accounts might seem dull or uninteresting.

Techniques

Vidal's most evident technique is the use of history to expand and enrich the fictional story about the Sanfords. His characters include those who are actual historical figures; those who are based on historical figures, but have been renamed; and fictional characters who are placed within the realm of history. The backdrop that Vidal uses is purely historical, which allows his interesting "insider's" view of the events of the 1940s and early 1950s. Vidal was present and active during this time period in Washington, D.C., New York, and Hollywood, thanks to his familial connections and the publication of his first novel at an early age. Therefore, he uses his own personal information and recollections to enhance the portraits of his characters. The effect is somewhat similar to the metafiction of his other novels, although not as pronounced. By allowing characters to occasionally foretell the future by using his backward-looking twenty-twenty vision, he calls attention to the construction of his story in particular, but really to that of history in general. He reminds the reader that the history that one reads in a history textbook has also been written with certain personal investments and assumptions. It is the myth of the 1940s and 1950s with its smooth transitions into war and out, and the myth of history in general that Vidal is here attempting to dispel with the interweaving of fact and fiction.

Themes

Ghosts are mentioned on numerous occasions and are used for one particular metaphor in the novel. The difference between the self that is out for the public to see and the self that is real and working behind the curtain is a major theme that runs throughout the book. Caroline is a former movie actress who views her life in Hollywood and the films she created as a past life, and the images up on the screen as a ghost of her real self. Her public persona had another name, Emma Traxler, and existed at a different time. This other persona still haunts her from time to time, especially when she returns to Los Angeles, and also when she interacts with her former lover and film production company partner, Timothy X. Farrell. Timothy makes documentaries, and it is partially through his eyes that we see that the public selves are carefully staged, even in documentaries. A similar ghostly analogy can be used within the context of the politicians and their public selves. The Roosevelt that the public sees is different from that which exists behind the doors of the Oval Office. This is partially represented by his insistence that he stand when making his speeches, despite his difficulty to do so. What the politicians say is not what they do, and getting reelected is their primary focus. The reader is brought into the private world of Washington, and Vidal reveals the real selves of his characters as a way to dispel the ghosts of the popular myths that surround these people and this time period.

The Golden Age also explores the constraints and the freedom of women of this time period. Caroline and Peter work as our eyes within the political system, and we can see the options that are open to each of them and the way in which they get their information. Caroline is seen to be a source of information because of her relationship with Harry Hopkins. She is constantly being asked why she did not marry Hopkins, for it would seem that the marriage would be convenient for him, and perhaps useful to her. Her refusal to marry anyone, except for convenience when she becomes pregnant with Emma (and not to Emma's real father), seems to be an anomaly within this circle.

Since the opportunities afforded to women at this time were limited, it is interesting to note how those who do have some ambition negotiate the male-dominated territory. Many of the women in the novel are caricatures; they are flighty women who mistake servants' names and seem to be completely disinterested, or flighty women who talk to animals, or oversexed hostesses with ambitions in journalism. Caroline is able to exert some influence because of her connections to the White House and because of her former status as owner and publisher of the Tribune. Although the paper is now owned and operated by her halfbrother, she is still able to step back into the role, as long as she does not interfere with his own position at the helm. She seems to be one of the characters most able to exert some influence within her circle. Part of the reason for this ability is her prudence, and her guiding principle of reason and perspective. Another positive example is Eleanor Roosevelt, who negotiates the territory with quite a bit of aplomb. She too has her enemies, just as her husband does, but she is a woman to be reckoned with. The relationship between FDR and his wife is fleshed out in Vidal's novel far beyond the history books; both FDR and Eleanor have their "companions" and they

work together and apart throughout Roosevelt's reign. Their relationship seems to be one of equals, which speaks well for Eleanor and her supporters.

Other women, such as Diana Day, daughter of a senator and object of Peter's lust, work through their marriages and their influence on the men around them to make their mark on society. Diana's honest outlook on life and politics acts in her service in the world of male power brokers. But her role is limited, like many of the female characters in this novel. When Eleanor mentions that she is "just an old politician of the wrong sex or the right sex but born at the wrong time" the boundaries to her freedom become clear.

Adaptations

An unabridged version of The Golden Age, read by Anne Twomey and narrated by Kathryn Walker, is available on tape. An abridged version, read by Gore Vidal and narrated by Kathryn Walker, is available on tape and compact disc. All of the recordings are produced by Bantam Books-Audio.

Key Questions

The Golden Age, if nothing else, presents an interesting look at the past and all its imperfections. Vidal would argue that it is these imperfections that textbooks leave out to the detriment of our own knowledge of history, and that is partially his reason for writing this series. His intertwining of fact and fiction may bring the issues to life, but it also creates new ones about the ability of fiction to teach us about the past. These problems may become clearer when the novel is supplemented with other texts outlining this same time period.

1. The Good War: An Oral History by Studs Terkel is a book filled with stories of World War II from a diverse group of people: from people still in the U.S. to those sent overseas, from the lowest soldier to some of the highest powers.

Most of the stories focus on people living outside of Washington, but the collection does include some by people involved in politics at the time. How does Terkel's portrayal of this time differ from that presented by Vidal? Are there issues that are included in Terkel's collection that Vidal leaves out, or only subtly mentions?

2. The End of Reform by Alan Brinkley focuses on Roosevelt and his "brain trust" at the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s. This is an inside look at the liberalist politics of Roosevelt and those around him. What do you think Brinkley would think of Vidal's portrayal of Roosevelt, especially his insinuations of Roosevelt's dealings with Japan leading up to Pearl Harbor?

3. What might Vidal say was the "American Ideal" in the 1940s and early 1950s?

How has it changed?

4. Why would Vidal end the book with a fast-forward look to the future? Are there any similar gestures that Vidal includes throughout the story?

5. What is the status of the public's "right to know" in this novel? Has it changed?

Do you think that the public should have access to political documents, such as the Pearl Harbor documents? Did the public have the right to know about FDR's affairs?

6. Look at how political conventions have changed over the years. What currents in society have caused those changes?

How do they reflect changes in politics?

7. Does the appearance of Vidal in his work surprise you? Does that affect the way that you look at the novel? Why would Vidal insert himself into the fiction?

8. What myths or assumptions in particular about this time period does it seem that Vidal wishes to dispel? What myths or assumptions does it seem that he wants to encourage?

Literary Precedents

Although Vidal's novel is historical, his writing does not belong with those of a naturalist or even the realist school of writing. The events and many of the characters Vidal includes did exist and so are realistic in that respect, but the way in which he manipulates the characters' places in space and time, and the acceleration of time from chapter to chapter until the fast-forward to the new millennium at the end, places him outside this vein. In terms of Vidal's writing as a whole, he owes credit to Italo Calvino, a writer Vidal greatly supported who brilliantly employs the techniques of metafiction. Calvino's novels such as Invisible Cities and The Baron in the Trees also use a historical backdrop with a modern reconfiguring, but in both of these novels, the historical backdrop is considerably more distant than the one that Vidal employs here. Calvino's influence is perhaps more apparent in Vidal's other novels that rely more heavily on metafiction, but it is still apparent in the case of this novel through such techniques as the self-conscious foreshadowing of historical events. An author like Jeanette Winterston is also a kindred spirit; her novels, such as Sexing the Cherry, place themselves in the past, but with a fastforward to the present.

Related Titles

The Golden Age is the seventh and final installment of Vidal's "American Empire" series—or "American Chronicles" as they are also called—which traces the United States' history from the Revolutionary War to the present. These novels trace various power centers and areas of interest within America in the twentieth century. The Golden Age actually resurrects the characters introduced in the book that started the "American Chronicles," Washington, D.C., which Vidal published in 1967. The Golden Age differs from its predecessor by focusing more on the historical figures that surround the fictional ones, rather than letting them slip into the background behind the inventive narrative. The other books in this epic series—Burr, Lincoln, 1876, Empire, and Hollywood,—all cover similar themes but different time periods, and each are quite thick with history, more so than his final novel of the series.

Vidal's other works—and there are many— are quite varied. He is well known, of course, for his works for the stage, most notably, The Best Man, a cynical play about politics.

He is also well known for the controversy that he caused with such books as Myra Breckenridge, a novel centering on a transsexual, and The City and the Pillar, an honest portrait of a homosexual man. Both of these books in their open and candid portrayals are echoed in The Golden Age, in its unflinchingly frank view of history and the people who made it.

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