The High and the Mighty Short Guide

The High and the Mighty by Ernest K. Gann

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Characters

Dan Roman emerges as the prototypical Gann hero: a strong, independent and lonely man, seemingly washed-up, emotionally or physically crippled. His surname and his nickname, "ancient pelican," suggest the dignity, strength, and longevity of a man dedicated to his career. Once a fearless test pilot, Roman is now tormented by memories of the crash which killed his wife and child and left him with a permanent limp; he seems an anachronism, an old copilot in a profession dominated by young fliers such as the capable Sullivan and the youthful third officer, Hobie Wheeler, who view him as a somewhat pathetic figure hanging on in a world he can neither leave nor control. Yet, of course, Roman's self-discipline, strength, experience, and knowledge of others allow him to calm both the passengers and Sullivan and allow the latter to regain control of himself and his ship.

Sullivan, however, becomes the most interesting character. Portrayed as a consummate professional, Sullivan becomes paralyzed with panic in an affecting and convincing portrait. He watches the fear grow in a detached manner, understanding it but unable to conquer it: "There were little signs to betray the feeling — the need for a cigarette when he had just finished one, asking for a cup of coffee when he really didn't want it. The [fear] bred caution, which was good, but it also caused little things to assume unwarranted importance, and this, he realized, could be the beginning of the end. Little by little, exaggeration of those small things bound to occur on any flight could wash against a pilot's judgment, withering it, until his thinking became unstable." When the number one engine catches fire, Sullivan becomes almost physically paralyzed, and his disintegration continues as he becomes obsessed with ditching the plane in the ocean and thus bringing the crisis to an immediate conclusion.

After Roman slaps him and takes control of the plane, Sullivan finds that his fear has passed, realizing that holding in the fear has been the problem that he must publicly acknowledge: "and the magic came from a has-been who had the nerve to name the disease out loud and call me a yellow son-of-abitch. The words did not sting — they healed." With this understanding comes the return of every flying instinct, so Sullivan turns to the job of landing the plane at night, in fog, at slow speed and with diminishing fuel.

The other characters — passengers and crew — represent not just a crosssection of American attitudes but a familiar collection of personality types, among them a brave but nervous stewardess, a randy young third officer, a competent but comic navigator, a rich business tycoon, a flamboyant Broadway producer and his neglected wife, an abandoned mistress, a beautiful and sensitive Korean girl, a jealous husband seeking to kill the supposed seducer of his wife, a loud working-class couple completing their comically disastrous vacation of a lifetime. Their stories have a kind of soap-opera appeal — strong on intriguing circumstance, weak on psychological depth — and, as they interact with one another in the present dilemma, they seem, like the pilots, larger than life, romantically or sentimentally heightened, recognizable if not always convincing. (The groundlings — weathermen, ticket agents, the radio operator of a ship,

airline officials, rescue crews — seem perhaps more real because they lack such personal histories and exist only in the world of work.) Yet the large cast, effectively introduced and controlled, provides a range of emotion and response that stands at the center of the novel, for Gann implies the interconnectedness of human beings, especially in the face of disaster. Most, although not all, reveal noble natures when facing the ultimate test.

Social Concerns

Gann's best novel derives from his own experience in flying an untrustworthy airliner from Honolulu to Portland, Oregon; the account in his autobiography is more comic, however, than the sustained suspense developed in the novel's story of a crippled plane carrying twenty-one persons from Hawaii to San Francisco. Gann effectively explains the mechanics of commercial aviation, and, more importantly, the psychology of flying. The insights into the fliers' minds as they cope with the routines of flight, with their own fears and those of their passengers, with the dependence on mechanical equipment, and, above all, with abstract notions of fate and chance give the book a timelessness not often found in contemporary popular fiction. Although set in the 1950s, aboard a propeller-driven aircraft on a twelve-hour flight, the pictures of pilots at work and in danger seem as true in the age of jet travel; if anything, modern pilots are even more dependent on more complex equipment and have even less time to react. "Structural failure was a thing of the past," Gann writes, "it just didn't happen any more; and yet, strangely enough, it was the one thing that still gnawed at most pilots' secret fears."

Similarly, the passengers reflect many basic American attitudes. Several, for instance, are caught up in the "rat race" mentality of New York business, society, and theater; a scientist who has worked on the atomic bomb is depressed about the possible effects of nuclear war; a new immigrant worries about how she will fit into society, and an Hispanic fisherman displays an understated intelligence and humanity that belies the prejudice with which many of the higher-class businessmen regard him. As these characters face the possibility of death and reflect on their public and private lives, they display a cross-section of types in the sophisticated, success-oriented, twentieth-century American society.

Techniques

Much of the novel's power derives from the shifting points of view. No single figure takes control of the book, and hence the reader focuses on the central situation — one feels that this is the story of an event rather than a character. The commentary of the groundlings and those aboard the rescue aircraft add to this focus. Likewise, the flashbacks, as the characters reflect on their lives, derive realistically from the situation and thus provide background while emphasizing the dramatic present.

Gann also concentrates the reader's attention through effective use of the classic dramatic unities of time, place, and action. The entire novel takes place in the fourteen hours of the flight and preflight activity; one remains constantly aware of the time through the flight reports, the passing of the point of no return, Frank Briscoe's chiming watch, and, toward the end, the amount of both time and fuel needed to make San Francisco. In addition, all the action takes place aboard or near the plane and in the two airports, while the unity of action is maintained in the not-so-simple act of getting Flight 4-2-0 safely to its destination.

Gann also creates suspense skillfully, building the aircraft's troubles slowly through ever-increasing aberrations in the plane's number one engine, noticed (sometimes subconsciously) by members of the crew through a difference in sound or a jiggling of a tray, until, in almost the exact center of the novel, the engine bursts into flame. The entire chapter 20, a masterful job of suspense building in itself, deals with the attempted landing almost exclusively through dialogue.

Perhaps Gann's strongest talent is his skill in producing a documentarystyle realism. If his stories border on melodrama and his characters seem like stereotypes, there can be little quarrel with the realistic backgrounds of his novels where he relies not so much on physical detail — there are few references to dates or events or products that tie the novel to the 1950s — as on the working routines of the unfamiliar world to which he introduces his readers. In this case, that world is the one of commercial aviation, and the novel becomes a fascinating compendium of routines: weather forecasts, preflight checks, navigation, treatment of passengers, instrument flying, emergency procedures, landing.

Gann uses similar documentary techniques effectively in all his books — the search and rescue operations of Island in the Sky, the world of commercial fishing in Fiddler's Green (1950), the Hong Kong back-grounds of Soldier of Fortune (1954), the historical treatments of World War I and Romanoccupied Israel in In the Company of Eagles (1966) and The Antagonists (1970), the day in the life of a big-city police station in Of Good and Evil (1963).

Throughout, Gann provides his material in a straightforward prose style which reinforces the book's verisimilitude. Gann presents, as one reviewer pointed out, not the poetry of flight as in the writings of Antoine de St. Exupery, but a full and true portrait of men at work, facing the difficulties and dangers as well as the exhilaration of a world apart from

the earth. As one review of The High and the Mighty commented, "Mr. Gann gets inside his plane as he never gets inside his characters."

Themes

Death and survival concern Gann in all his works, from the near-documentary Island in the Sky (1944) to the nearparable The Aviator (1981), as well as the autobiography and the superb Fate is the Hunter (1961). In The High and the Mighty, Gann explores the ways in which his various types of people face death, ranging from the newly-wed couple, the Bucks, to the disease-ridden Frank Briscoe. As Garfield, the operations manager, observes the disembarking passengers, he reflects, "you are astonished that there is always a thing so real and near as death.

It is, as you have possibly observed ...

a clever device for the measurement of all men." For some, the experience will change them; for others, it will be a mere memory; while still others will revert back to their original lives.

While one can guess the reactions of some of the passengers, the collapse of others comes as a surprise.

Salvation is largely beyond the control of the passengers who must depend on the pilots' abilities just as the pilots remain at the mercy of their equipment. But they must, in Gann's terms, face the predicament with the same kind of dignity, courage, good humor and humanity shown by Briscoe in the face of the debilitating ailment killing him. The pilots likewise display their courage not so much through physical action but in the conquering of their private (and inevitable) fear and the demonstration of a complete professionalism which provides a means of coping with the paralyzing fear. Flying "was not an adventure," the copilot Dan Roman reflects. "It was the opening of a business in which the penalties for failure could be more final than bankruptcy. As professionals they recognized that, regardless of near mechanical perfection, there were and always would be certain penalties for movement." It is the veteran Roman, considered by the rest of the crew to be over the hill at age fifty-three, who cajoles, browbeats, and even strikes the pilot, Sullivan, in an attempt to bring the latter's growing fear under control; but it is Sullivan, finally, who lands the plane, having overcome the fear that, Gann argues, every flier faces, "the occupational disease which came upon some pilots more slowly than others, but which eventually came to them all ... as surely as the hours mounted in his log book."

Adaptations

The High and the Mighty became a big-budget motion picture directed by William Wellman, produced by the Wayne-Fellows organization, and released on July 3, 1954 to considerable success and generally good reviews.

The movie's strengths include a faithful adaptation (by Gann) which intensifies the sense of isolation and helplessness aboard the plane and develops the suspense and sense of passing time most effectively. The casting is also exceptional: John Wayne, although younger and more heroically charismatic, contributes a controlled performance as Dan Roman; Robert Stack seems more outwardly hysterical as Sullivan, although that may be due to the film medium; other particularly notable performances were given by Phil Harris and Robert Newton. Jan Sterling and Claire Trevor were nominated for Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actress; Dimitri Tiomkin won the Oscar for Best Musical Score, which included the haunting theme that Roman whistles constantly — an image carried over from the novel. The long 147-minute movie rarely appears on television, although televisionmovie reviewers give it high praise.

Literary Precedents

Gann's autobiography, A Hostage to Fortune (1978), refers to his father's predilection for reading romances, and occasional allusions in his own works suggest a wide and eclectic reading.

His fictional plots and stories perhaps derive from action-adventure tales, although he often plays down extreme melodrama to increase the suspense and sense of reality. Specific parallels might include works like John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy (1996) or Manhattan Transfer (1925), which also make use of shifting points of view between many varied characters and of a similar documentary realism, although Dos Passos's scope is considerably greater than the single action of The High and the Mighty. Clearly, too, the book forms part of the tradition of disaster novels, especially in aviation, following Nevil Shute's No Highwa y (1948) and preced ing Arthur Hailey's Airport (1968).

Perhaps even more important, though, to Gann (as, indeed, to most contemporary writers) has been the pervasive influence of the movies. In his teens, Gann wrote, directed, and produced a "feature" film; later, he directed screen tests for Warner Brothers and worked as a newsreel cameraman; and, finally, he wrote screenplays. Such popular 1930s films as Grand Hotel, Dinner at Eight, and Stagecoach, with their multiple characters and single-action development, resemble The High and the Mighty, while the whole recent disaster genre of films looks back to Gann's novel. The remarkable success of Gann's books being sold to Hollywood and generally reaching the screen can surely be attributed to the kinds of characters, stories, and scenes he has written for nearly forty years. Much of his dramatic ability — the understatement, the dialogue, the memory-flashback sequences especially — may result partially from his attending, as a special student, the Yale Drama School.

Related Titles

Aviation forms the basis of Gann's best work. His first novel, Island in the Sky, recounts the hunt for a downed plane in Labrador during the Second World War; while his colleagues in the Air Transport Command spend days fighting bad weather and limited fuel searching uncharted wastes, Dooley and the crew of the crashed Corsair attempt to survive the arctic conditions on the ground. The book is a lean, dramatic, and totally convincing account of search, rescue, and survival.

Blaze of Noon (1946) and Band of Brothers (1973) deal with the early days of airmail flying and the crash of a jet in China, with effective flying sequences but less successful stories. Gann's popular novel, The Aviator, is a short, parablelike story of a jaded airmail pilot's rediscovery of life after he crashes and tries to survive with his passenger, a precocious eleven-year-old girl. The nonfiction Flying Circus (1974) contains "biographies" of the significant commercial and private prop planes that Gann has flown. But perhaps one of his finest works is another piece of nonfiction, Fate Is the Hunter, which elucidates many of the themes found in Gann's fiction. Here, Gann recounts stories of accidents and near-accidents which illustrate the dangers of flying and the inevitability of some kind of major crisis. All men are subject to the whims of fate; fliers, who perhaps contest against it most often and most clearly, demonstrate the varied range of human responses. Although nonfiction, Fate Is the Hunter was also filmed, with Glenn Ford as a crash investigator.

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