The Immigrants Short Guide

The Immigrants by Howard Fast

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Characters

The romantic adventurer depicted in Dan Lavette is a staple of popular fiction, the assertive, unconventional ethnic type whose brashness both shocks and represses conventional propriety. Dan, however, rises above the conventional portrait. No Stanley Kowalski, his assertion is tempered with warmhearted humanity and generosity. In contrast, the Seldons are the quintessential stuffy, conventional WASPs, a heritage Jean struggles to overcome. As is usual in Fast, primary characters share a quality of personal warmth and charisma despite their shortcomings. Moreover, they embody what is for Fast a mainstay — each character demonstrates contradictions which his actions reveal. In Dan Lavette, personal warmheartedness and impulsiveness appear in contrast to the things he must do to achieve and maintain his financial ascendancy; for Jean Seldon Lavette, a budding personal and sexual style emerges in contrast to her repressed, dull upbringing.

In his ethnic characters, Fast both contributes to and criticizes traditional portraits. Although he portrays the ebullient Italian, the quiet, subdued Jew, and the competent, family-oriented Asian-American, Fast's characters break out of their conventional molds. Inventive and intelligent, May Ling is completely different from the stereotypical submissive, repressed Asian-American woman; Feng Wo, a translator of Chinese philosophy, is the brains of Lavette's financial empire.

Their ultimate decision to break away from Dan's influence when he fails to marry May Ling asserts their independence and forces Dan to come to terms with his own ambivalence. In Fast, traditional and nontraditional images create a rich ethnic mix in a novel where ethnicity and the marriage, both figurative and literal, between opposites become a metaphor for a strong and fertile future.

Fast's characterization of women is somewhat unique among popular writers, since his handling of female characters is much more full and sympathetic than is often the case — even though there is never a plain one among them. Although marked by sexism in their restricted lives, his women are strong and resourceful, never victims. Frequently, they function traditionally to remind men of the lost worlds of feeling and morality, and in Dan Lavette and May Ling he depicts the intuitive, articulate, humanistic woman liberating the inarticulate, isolated, confused man, estranged from himself and his own feelings. Men, on the other hand, are often compared to little boys, impulsive and active, lacking introspection and thoughtfulness, needing to prove themselves through bravado and bluster.

Social Concerns/Themes

Fast's concern in this first volume of a five-volume family saga set in California is the development of American industrial capitalism from the turn of the century until the Depression and its effect on those who participate in it.

Always, he explores the interface between the promise of democratic liberalism and the classism, racism, and sexism which blight both personal and public life. Against the background of two world wars, Vietnam, and finally American involvement in El Salvador, the economic boom of the early part of this century, the Depression, McCarthyism, and the development of American interests which involve policing most of the globe, Fast creates characters who interact with and contribute to these events.

In this reworking of the Horatio Alger myth, Fast shows not only the opportunity offered by the immigrants' new environment, but also the toll taken by the need to compete and exert oneself economically. Dan Lavette rises from his beginnings as a fisherman to become a shipping magnate with his finger in every other moneymaker imaginable — department stores, airlines, hotels, and a marriage into the Seldons, one of San Francisco's foremost families. A good man, warmhearted, fair, and industrious, Dan asserts himself in economic terms (an activity always viewed as a "game," never a quest for money), yet is somehow robbed of fulfillment as his struggle to achieve destroys his spiritual and moral orientation, leaving him with little sense of selfhood or identity.

Along with the romance and adventure of achievement come guilt and loneliness, a spiral of boom and bust in which economic cycles are mirrored in psychological life.

Different social classes and ethnic groups conflict and merge with one another, not only the Italian, Jewish, and Irish immigrants, but also the "WASP" Seldons and immigrant Lavettes. The presence of ethnic minorities, especially Asian Americans as represented by Feng Wo and May Ling, invigorates the culture and contributes to its survival. However, a heritage of racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism lessens the chances for individual fulfillment. Dan, estranged from his cold, confused wife Jean (who finds herself overwhelmed and without identity in her marriage to the flamboyant, energetic seaman), lives secretly with May Ling, the Chinese woman he loves, whose father, Feng Wo, works as Dan's accountant, an unusual position for a Chinese at the time. Even so, Dan is unable to resolve the two conflicting commitments until compelled by the loss of his financial empire in the Depression (Jean, as president of the bank, calls in their loans). His relationships with his three children, two by Jean and one by May Ling, are likewise splintered, as the building of an economic empire exacts his primary energies. The division between groups and between sexes as revealed in the lack of communication between characters — Feng Wo never speaks of his daughter's relationship, but instead quits his job, and Dan and Jean never speak.

Action, rather than speech, reveals feelings.

Basically, however, the rich mixture of opportunity and the heterogeneous culture in early industrial California is invigorating and positive. Fast's theme of ethnicity — WASPs, Italians, Jews, and Chinese — is a strong thread of endurance and continuity in the novel, as the lives of the families and their children are intertwined, through finances or romance, and point toward a future which, although not totally positive, is still bright and optimistic, indicating humanity's rise above the prejudice and ignorance to the promise of its moral strength and vitality. Fast's teleological theme of aspiration toward achievement, individuality, wholeness, emotional warmth and well-being is undercut by his depiction of the inroads that can be made on these qualities by the harsh necessities of industrial capitalism and human aspiration unguided by love.

Techniques

The Immigrants, a tour de force in narrative style, deftly weaves the stories of its several families against the backdrop of burgeoning California culture. In a series of swiftly changing, short scenarios, linked by chance and by compulsion, family history intertwines itself with that of the community and the world at large. The families are tied together personally, economically, and romantically, as are the fortunes of society and the culture as a whole.

What unifies Fast's technical flair, however, is the way his conception of history is embodied not only in narrative, but in character as well. Characters are developed and their motivations are revealed objectively, through scenes of dialogue. People define themselves through commitment and choice, revealed by their actions, which often occur with striking swiftness, creating a frenzied quality which matches the whirlwind, hyperactive quality of life on this particular roller coaster.

The novel is not lacking, however, in commentary. The narrator himself, a tart, vivacious type similar in some ways, one might imagine, to Fast himself, comments freely both on character and action. The narrator, however, lacks both historical perspective and an historical philosophy. Other characters, such as Rabbi Blum, the old Jew who gives the Levy children's winery its start by ordering the Passover libation, puts the novel's philosophy into words, speaking to Sarah Levy after the death of her daughter Martha, an aspiring film star, in an auto crash: "But the idea of justice is something we put together, not God." "And what does he put together, a madhouse?" "That has occurred to me. On the other hand, even a cup of tea has its own good taste."

Literary Precedents

Fast is, of course, in the line of the great critical realists with a humanistic bent. The epic sweep of the Immigrant series, its depiction of bourgeois culture against a backdrop of capitalist imperialism and twentieth-century global conflict, is clearly reminiscent of Tolstoy — Dan Lavette reads War and Peace while serving time for a barroom brawl. In the American line, he is clearly indebted to Twain, whom he regards as a model for the popular, realistic novel. He is indebted to Melville for his social message. Hamlin Garland, Sherwood Anderson, and William Dean Howells, whose Rise of Silas Lapham is a model for urban realism, continue the line, although the Western setting brings most clearly to mind Frank Norris and Jack London (who is mentioned many times in Fast's novels) with their superheroes and unique blend of critical realism with rugged individualism. Pre-eminent, however, is Theodore Dreiser (whom Dan reads and whose short stories Fast edited), in his stories of immigrant boys on the make, caught up in an industrial capitalism which both creates and overwhelms them. Present in Fast's technique is the legacy of John Dos Passos, with his short vignettes, flat, objective depiction of character, and sweep of world events against the backdrop where people struggle for consciousness in a world of seemingly incomprehensible happenings. John Steinbeck, whose epic of rural people migrating to California played a major role in popular realism during this century, and the urban milieu of James T. Farrell, are also interesting parallels.

Related Titles

The Immigrants is the beginning of a fully-conceived family saga which ends in 1985 with The Immigrant's Daughter.

Dan Lavette's financial ruin and the death of his partner Mark Levy and Anthony Cassala, their friend and banker, as well as of the elder Seldons, marks the end of an heroic era for the immigrants, whose great age of adventure is the foundation for the subsequent development of monopoly capitalism.

Second Generation (1979) chronicles a shift to more institutionalized, regulated ways of living life and doing business. Here, personal life, especially love, and individual commitment, rather than achievement or ambition, make people human. Barbara Lavette, Dan and Jean's daughter, now a student at Sarah Lawrence College, the female protagonist of the series, has a history which in many ways parallels Fast's own. Emerging from her adolescent frivolity, Barbara discovers herself politically as a volunteer relief worker during the longshore strikes, where a pattern for her life is set when the young worker who loves her is killed, and professionally as a writer in Paris, where she falls in love with a French journalist who is killed in Spain, finally marrying Bernie Cohen, a young Zionist on his way to Palestine. Dan, his false self lost in the crash of his empire, struggles painfully to a new awareness, marrying May Ling and working as a fisherman, an episode which ends with May Ling's death during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Linking his volumes together with parallel scenes, settings, and action, Fast develops the family saga through World War II and the 1950s in The Establishment (1980) and The Legacy (1981). Mirroring in many ways Fast's own career, Barbara Lavette, a writer and political activist, refuses to answer House Un-American Activities Committee questions about a hospital for Spanish Civil War refugees run by the foundation she has used her inheritance to establish and serves to six months in prison. Her husband and the father of her child Sam, the Zionist Bernie Cohen, is killed in an Arab raid while on a military mission in Palestine. A positive, optimistic character, her toughness, high-spirits and generosity match her personal attractiveness and vivacity to make her another of Fast's most appealing characters, "the last real romantic" in the style of Dan Lavette.

Exploring the growth of an impersonal, faceless state power and the individual's need for authentic personal relationships, Fast develops the themes of individual liberties and sexual politics in these intermediate novels. Men and women, drawn together by a need to complete with one another, are always propelled apart by the individual's essential aloneness in pursuing his or her destiny or, often, by unresolved sexist issues. The men worry about their breadwinner role and have trouble getting an erection; the women pursue their own identity, yet feel deprived of the intimacy and security of traditional relationships. As always in Fast, money is a keystone, the symbol of potency and success in advanced capitalism, but a symbol which no longer offers the intriguing "game" quality it had during the adventurous period.

Instead, the state of loneliness replaces the struggle for economic survival as a permanent condition in midcentury, as the search for personal connection, commitment, and community and the display of loyalty and courage become the earmarks of humanity.

Idealists like Barbara and Bernie struggle with a world which no longer recognizes or supports these values.

The Immigrant's Daughter completes Fast's portrayal of American society in recent times in the story of Barbara Lavette's mature years. Political and social reality still provide an essential backdrop, as the peace and antiwar movements assume the role the labor movement had for an earlier generation.

Barbara, searching for action and commitment in her life again after the death of her third husband, runs for Congress on a peace platform and, defeated by an opportunistic rival who raises the specter of her "radical" past, goes as a correspondent to El Salvador, where she witnesses the atrocities committed by the U.S.-supported military dictatorship in a plot filled with current events — refugees, tales of torture and the murder of the three AFL-CIO land reform experts. The legacy of the Vietnam War is still present in this last in the series, where the promise of the land of opportunity has given way to a present in which American capitalism must wage continual warfare to maintain its interests and the specter of worldwide nuclear war is ever present.

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