Keep the Change Short Guide

Keep the Change by Thomas McGuane

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Contents

Keep the Change Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Characters....3

Social Concerns/Themes....4

Techniques/Literary Precedents....5

Key Questions....6

Related Titles....7

Copyright Information....8

Characters

The novel's protagonist, Joe Starling, is a failed painter coming to terms with that failure, with his father's legacy, and with his own inadequacies and obsessions. Largely an observer of other people's lives, and not always a perceptive one at that, Starling's detachment from other people and things settles around him like snow. Yet he acknowledges his detachment wistfully and with a full measure of self-criticism, as when he notes that his character is "composed almost strictly of things I hate in other people."

On the other hand, Starling is presented with few examples of a commitment to values more compelling than his own. His father is ruthless; Mr. Overstreet is obsessed with completing his land's symmetry; and his friend Ivan Slater, another of the "new industrialists" in the C. J. Clovis mode, is devoted to a pet scheme of marketing a home lie detector. The odd, parodic marriage of his Aunt Lureen and Uncle Smitty provides some possibilities in their mutual devotion, but also stands as a criticism leveled at Starling's own parents and at marriage in general. In his dissociation from those around him, Starling resembles earlier McGuane protagonists, yet he goes beyond them in his attempt to bridge that dissociation.

Much of the impetus for his quest comes from women. McGuane's depiction of Starling's fumbling first love with Ellen Overstreet is startlingly realistic. In her apparent domesticity and suburban security she harbors a capacity to manipulate and use Starling for her own designs. Contrasted with Ellen is the Cuban sensuality and wildness of Starling's lover, Astrid. The character of Astrid shows that criticism formerly leveled at McGuane's treatment of women is less cogent regarding Keep the Change. Certainly, she remains secondary to a protagonist who, in his isolation, is recognizably male and thus set apart from the feminine as opposite; and crude sexist jokes persist in this text despite their immediate labeling by both Starling and McGuane as "infantilism." But Astrid finally, for all her unlikelihood, or perhaps because of it, stands formidably and fiercely there in Starling's vision.

It is also noteworthy that Starling's lifelong enmity with Billy Kelton is dissipated at the novel's end. Kelton appears at first to represent the same kind of half-mad, half-dumb male adversary as Nichol Dance or Wayne Codd did in earlier McGuane novels.

Yet his role in Keep the Change is an expanded one, even from the boyhood fight that teaches Starling the lesson that "life had as one of its constant characteristics a strain of unbearable loneliness." Upon seeing Billy's retarded daughter, the daughter that could have been his, Starling goes beyond compassion and identifies with Billy "in all his isolated, violent ignorance."

Social Concerns/Themes

Those readers familiar with McGuane's work will recognize in Keep the Change his continuing indictment of the unreflective acquisitiveness of American society. That the father of protagonist Joe Starling keeps a brace of dogs named Neuritis and Neuralgia and horses called Hart, Schaffner, and Marx is one more instance of McGuane's ironic notation of the infection of all facets of American life by the corporate ethic. Yet McGuane's treatment of this theme is less explosive here than in his earlier novels; rather, it is a given, the necessary condition of contemporary life against which the individual struggles to establish a sense of more permanent value.

Emerging from the contrast between various kinds of lives enacted in suburban Minnesota, the Florida Keys, the Montana prairie, and elsewhere, is Starling's sense that what he is looking for, finally, is "home." Much of the novel therefore engages in an exploratory definition of what that space consists of, the possibilities inherent in the end of restlessness. The resolution of this question is at best provisional and temporary, yet it is more clearly and hopefully realized here than elsewhere in McGuane's work. Starling's trek from Florida to Montana (again, favored McGuane locales) provides an opportunity to show the essential disconnectedness of American life, where the American plains appear to be one enormous mobile garage sale — all taken in randomly, while in flight.

Still, while The Bushwhacked Piano (1971) ended with the inscription of Nicholas Payne's estrangement — "I am at large" — Keep the Change offers an abandonment of the desperado stance in Starling and his lover Astrid's shared acknowledgement that they "would pretty much have to see."

In large measure, this resolution works itself out through Starling's relinquishment of his inheritance — both the profits of his labor on the ranch, and ultimately the very deed itself. In doing so, he is ostensibly giving up his own dream of home, but the relinquishment is itself a kind of repossession of his soul, of another kind of home. His gift of the ranch to Billy Kelton signals not so much the reunion of their friendship as it does their shared opposition to those who would own the land merely for the sake of doing so, rather than those who work it and belong to it. In Starling's exchange of his own labor for the complex of frauds that his uncle devises, McGuane presents a complicated interweaving of fraud and honesty that ultimately displaces and transcends those categories. The novel begins and ends with a contemplation of the ruins of past effort and the possibilities inherent in ownership in the house of the Silver King, where Starling goes with his father to see a painting of a snowy landscape that is later revealed to be only an empty frame on a plaster wall.

In this densely layered metaphor, McGuane speaks to the aesthetics of modern art, the persistence of illusion, and the infinite adaptability of interpretation. The novel concludes with the sense that long-standing debts — to the past, to the land, to family, to love, to the illusions of youth — are finally discharged.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The comparison of McGuane to Hemingway is still appropriate, perhaps now even more so. McGuane himself has noted that while Hemingway-bashing is a kind of approved stance in American letters, he remains in McGuane's words "a figure that casts a tremendous shadow for better or for worse." Here, with McGuane's focus on an isolated man fighting the forces of engulfment, and in his lean and highly polished prose style, the comparison to Hemingway is accurate. The most important precedent, however, is to be found in McGuane's earlier work, to which Keep the Change serves as a kind of culmination.

An essentially realistic manner comes to the fore in Keep the Change as well. The novel elicits a sense of American life as filled with "things," and with the struggle of honest efforts on all fronts. McGuane devotes much space to the business of ranching and raising cattle, and ultimately realizes a combination of cold-eyed labor and dreamy desirousness that inhabits all the characters in one form or another.

Even Ivan Slater, Billy Kelton, and Joe's father, "types" that would have been villainized in earlier McGuane novels, are here invested with the desire for something genuinely better than that which characterizes Starling himself.

Much of Starling's revelation, then, is a gradual awareness of the connectedness of the people around him through this quality — an awareness that itself gradually yields into a sense of forgiveness.

Key Questions

Discussion of this novel will be successful to the degree that it grants a depth of complexity not usually accorded to the discussion of a specifically "male" posture in American society — whether taken in relation to the female or not. A movement past cliche is therefore in order; perhaps an attention to McGuane's portrayal of the limits of artistic sensibility is the best starting point.

1. To what extent is Sonny Starling's conversion to cold-hearted banker a betrayal of the independent, self-reliant ethic of the American West? What is the significance of Joe's dreams wherein his father appears?

2. Joe Starling is not a failure as an artist, as his father fears he will be.

Why then does Starling's art fail him?

Why is "art" insufficient here to support a continued sense of self-worth, of happiness or meaning?

3. What exactly is symbolized by the painting in the house of the Silver King, and by the realization that it is not a painting at all?

4. Who does this novel regard as the worse evil — the rapacious land baron Overstreet or the lunatic entrepreneur Ivan Slater?

5. What characteristics do Joe Starling and Billy Kelton share that allow them to bridge their natural and encouraged enmity? Do they share an essentially similar belief system?

6. Is Ellen's lie with respect to the paternity of Clara a justifiable one, under the circumstances? Why does she lie about it, and to what end?

7. What is the significance of Joe's maggot-infested dog?

8. Why has McGuane chosen to portray Astrid as a Cuban?

Related Titles

Keep the Change follows a continuum of McGuane heroes from Nobody's Angel (1981) through Something to be Desired (1984), moving closer to a solution of the dilemma best characterized by McGuane's own remark about Something to be Desired: "it really is a case of a man discovering that a narcissistic crisis is going to bear penalties which are permanent." These novels, taken together, constitute a progressive working out of the problem of living as a man in contemporary America. Keep the Change is less stylistically clever than McGuane's early novels, and less labored in its humor, which gives greater cleanness and clarity to the prose.

To some extent the McGuane landscape has altered. His rhapsodic view of Montana serves as an antidote to the plasticity of American urban life so roundly vilified in his earlier novels.

This, like other sources of comfort, is only provisionally held, yet it is nevertheless there and real in its beauty, like the empty frame surrounding an absent and imagined canvas. In a very real sense, all of the resolution and forgiveness of Keep the Change is contained in the anecdote of the empty frame that itself frames the book, and in Starling's final realization that "it wasn't an empty frame; it was his father telling him that somewhere in the abyss something shone."

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