Kent Family Chronicles Short Guide

Kent Family Chronicles by John Jakes

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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".

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Contents

Characters

The patriarch of the Kent Family Chronicles (The Bastard, 1974; The Rebels, 1975; The Seekers, 1975) is Philip Kent, whose experiences in France and England motivate him to cross the Atlantic and join the struggle for America's independence. No longer interested in fighting for his inheritance, he begins anew. With the voyage and the death of his mother en route, Phillipe, aka Philip, in effect, crosses the point of no return and commences a desperate search for a place in the new world.

The portrayal of Philip shifts from the realistic to the contrived; he is sometimes portrayed sympathetically, other times not. Although not always successful in achieving his immediate goals, the character possesses a superhuman quality whereby he can slay his adversary and emerge untarnished.

Representing the pioneering spirit of the country itself, Philip settles down and absorbs ideas from colonists, becoming politically active in the cause of freedom. Wavering between reality and illusion, frequently caught in the present while haunted by his past, Philip emerges as the dominant figure in the story. Life in the new world is not always simple and Philip must decide what personal price he is willing to pay for liberty.

Kent faces one crisis after another.

He is absolved of the necessity of deciding whether or not to desert from the army when he is injured and medically discharged. However, his fate, once more, plays havoc upon him and when he returns home, he finds his wife dead.

As the powerful, godlike American hero, he recovers from his loss, remarries and, despite his personal rebellions as a child, he begins to rule the destiny of his own children. Thus, from generation to generation, the character of the Kent central figure is transmitted and the obstinacy, the determination, and the fight for emancipation continues.

Philip's antagonist in The Bastard is Roger, the stepbrother, who possesses the royal position Philip desires. The conceited and self-confident Roger marries Philip's mistress. Evil and spiteful, under the illusion that he is master of the world, Roger sets out to destroy Philip, but predictably meets his own doom.

The women in the three novels are portrayed with varying attitudes and characteristics. Philip's mother is determined to obtain the inheritance for her son and emerges as a loving, strong, domineering woman. Alicia, Philip's mistress and Roger's wife, is sinful and manipulative. Anne, Philip's wife, represents goodness, for although she possesses knowledge that would prevent Philip from a rendezvous with Alicia, she maintains silence and takes her chances. Elizabeth, the stepdaughter, is depicted as a rebel and a wench; Harriet, the opposite.

The characters are generally realistically portrayed as full of frailties, obsessions, and lusts as they integrate into American life. Philip's children in The Seekers represent a search for freedom and when his son, Abraham, marries his stepsister against Philip's will, the newlyweds head westward to discover their own destiny. In the succeeding generations, new characters come forth who try to uphold the pioneering traditions and the characteristics displayed by their patriarch. Some succeed, others fail as they carry on the seeds of the past and move ahead into the future.

Social Concerns

The Bastard, The Rebels, and The Seekers are the first three novels in a series of eight connected books in American historical fiction that are replete with social concerns. In The Bastard, the unwed mother, Marie, is a Parisian actress, the father is an English nobleman, and Phillipe Charboneau is the bastard offspring. The mother's "evil" deed of bearing a child out of wedlock and her occupation preclude her acceptance into the church and society. This social concern recurs in The Rebels, when a character named Peggy gives birth to another bastard, Elizabeth, who is hidden in a foster home to prevent the mother's disgrace, and is brought back to the family only when the mother ultimately marries Phillipe, now known as Philip Kent. Elizabeth, upon maturity, desires to read a novel of seduction, which is vetoed by her stepfather, Philip, the original bastard.

She questions the values of adults who forbid her to read of seduction even as they speak gloriously of slaughtering Indians.

The social status and the power of the aristocracy are repeatedly discussed in all three novels. The differences in dress, in education and in attitudes between the classes are clearly delineated. While waiting to receive his inheritance, Philip, in self defense, kills an aristocrat. He is immediately cognizant of the fact that he has no chance to prove his innocence, for those in power will automatically side with the elite victim. When a beggar is killed later in the story, no one cares, for he is symbolic of the ruination of the neighborhood; a human life is, in itself, of no importance. Philip's mother obsessively desires him to become a man of wealth and position. Instead, Philip becomes a rebel who actively agitates against the crown.

In The Rebels, Philip retains much of his original thinking, but in The Seekers, this same man, now matured and living in America, tells his children, "Be welcome among the rich." In his new life, where Charboneau is now known as Philip Kent, a successful Boston publisher, Philip begins to accept the social concept that only the rich and well-educated are competent to administer the affairs of the new nation, a surprising change in attitude.

The role of the woman in society is a social concern that weaves through the plots and subplots of the series. In The Bastard, Alicia manipulates Philip and deceives him when it suits her purpose. In The Seekers, Harriet, physically repelled by her husband's advances, rebels against male superiority in marital rights. In this novel, Elizabeth expresses disgust that females are subservient to males.

The position of blacks in America is raised in The Rebels when Judson interferes with the whipping of an idle black man. He warns his father, the wealthy plantation owner, to treat the blacks with more concern in order to avoid an impending revolt. Set in his ways, the father continues his behavior until the opposition mounts and a revolt ensues.

Techniques

The Bastard is told in third-person narrative from the point of view of Philip Kent, the central character. The later volumes become more impersonal and objective and are related by an omniscient narrator as is Homeland (1993). Somewhere in the first section of each subsequent novel, there appears a brief summary of the preceding story thereby enabling the reader to pick up the series at almost any point.

The first book in the epic adventure begins with a dream, a foreboding of the situations that will evolve. Using the wind as a metaphor — the winds of luck and the changing circum stances — the author describes the trials and tribulations, the glory and defeat, of the Kent family. The actions shift from character to character, especially in The Rebels and The Seekers where one or two chapters deal with a person's life before his story is temporarily shelved and returned to at a later time. The story, full of intertwined plots and subplots is sometimes difficult to follow.

With a relaxed, descriptive style, fast-moving action and realistic dialogue, the author creates a curiosity that makes one want to read on. The characters come alive by virtue of their passions and frustrations and dreams, and they are easy for readers to identify with as the author portrays them with a sympathetic tone.

Jakes provides an in-depth study of settings, characters and events, both personal and historical. Intermingling real personalities with fictitious ones, Jakes fills his numerous pages with interesting scripts. In The Bastard, Philip Kent meets Benjamin Franklin, whose ideas stimulate his interest in America, In The Rebels, Kent is with George Washington at Valley Forge and renews his acquaintance with the Marquis de Lafayette, whom he had first met in France. Both The Seekers and The Furies depict the beginnings of the westward movement and demonstrate Jakes's characteristically careful research into American history. Although soap-operaish at times, his novels succeed at presenting a history of the pioneering spirit, the search for democracy and the creation and expansion of a new land.

Themes

Foremost among Jakes's themes are freedom and independence not only for the individual person, but for the new country as well. The reflection of the fulfillment of one's own destiny, the constant search for liberation, and the pursuit of the American Dream intertwine as the characters work for personal emancipation and join the struggle for the establishment and expansion of the United States of America. In The Bastard, Kent seeks his place in life and is faced with the conflict of whether to adhere to the aristocracy of his father and the dream of his mother or to reaffirm his own values. Kent decides to leave for America and joins the revolt against the British oppression.

Judson, in The Rebels, strives for his independence and breaks away from his father's bond. Abraham Kent in The Seekers resists what his father wants for him and follows his own dictates.

In terms of patriotism, the struggle for survival and the fighting for a cause, Jakes suggests that anything worth having commands a high price.

The characters face one situation after another in which their stamina is tested and for which they must constantly be reminded that the goal is worth the struggle.

The theme of imprisonment is also found throughout the series, with the characters facing dilemmas from which they have difficulty extricating themselves. In The Bastard, Philip finds that he is trapped when he wants to desert the army in order to join his wife who is in physical danger. Elizabeth and Abraham in The Seekers find their father rules their lives and Harriet in the same novel is trapped by her unfortunate marriage to Gilbert Kent.

Throughout the series, the characters find themselves entrapped in one situation after another both on a personal level and in their efforts to mold a new nation.

Many minor themes emerge. The issue of mercy-killing arises when the soldiers must decide whether to kill a badly wounded friend on the battlefield. Hypocrisy enters the saga when Governor Hutchison pretends to sympathize with the colonists while secretly helping the British. Chaos and order, cowardice and heroism are depicted by Jakes in his massive attempt to recreate American history from the pre-Colonial days until the 1900s.

These many themes are interrelated in the sweeping panorama. Although occasionally too melodramatic, the stories are a significant contribution to the annals of historical fiction.

Adaptations

The first three novels of the Kent Family Chronicles were adapted for television by Operation Prime Time between May, 1978 and December, 1979.

Produced by Universal Studios in 1979, The Seekers, the third novel, included Jakes in a small acting role. It was directed by Sidney Hayers and starred Delta Burke, Rosey Grier, George Hamilton, Barbara Rush, and Hugh O'Brian.

In the 1985-1986 season, an extensive production of North and South appeared as a television miniseries. The miniseries ran twenty-four hours and was divided into two parts: North and South and North and South II. While apparently following the original text, the reproductions were criticized as ridiculous melodramas and were commended more for their effort than for their results. Starring several well-known actors and actresses in stock bit parts, replete with period costumes and elaborate settings, the first series alone took five months to film. Although the sequel fared slightly better, neither television version emerged as a worthwhile endeavor.

Key Questions

The Bastard, The Rebels, and The Seekers offer ample opportunity for gener ating discussions and group projects.

The greatest difficulty may be finding a focus for discussions, because the historical events covered are diverse and scattered across a long period. If group members are primarily interested in the family drama of the novels, a successful focus could be one that emphasizes the interaction of characters and Jakes's notions of what constitutes a "family," or another successful focus could be on the challenging topic of how historical events shape the lives of individual people. Are they swept along by history or do they have some individual effect on events? Can they alter events?

Project possibilities abound. One possibility is to research the significant historical events and compare what historians say to how Jakes depicts the events. This would work particularly well for a group interested primarily in the lively dramatizations of historical events in the novels. Many people learn their history from historical novels, so the question of accuracy is an important one. Such projects could spin off into discussions of how much artistic license should be allowed to a historical novelist, whether novelists have any obligation to preserve facts, and whether historical fiction is the best medium for teaching history. Remember Horace's creed that if a writer wishes to teach, that writer should first entertain. Are Jakes's novels good examples of this creed, or do they prove that the creed is a bad one?

1. How do American views of women change during the series of novels? Note how "bad" women and "good" women are treated in each succeeding story. What is Jakes saying about the shaping and growth of American values through his depictions of women?

2. It is hard for an author to avoid reflecting his opinions and the values of his own time when writing historical fiction. One example of this difficulty is Jakes's account of the treatment of Indians. Is Elizabeth's attitude in this regard too modern? Is her attitude about women's relationship to men too modern? Why does Jakes give her such attitudes?

3. What does the characters' work for personal emancipation say about America and American history?

4. What are the reasons characters have for revolting against the motherland? Are these good reasons? Are they historically accurate? Should their attitudes be typical of the period, or is Jakes to be allowed to give his characters idiosyncratic reasons?

5. Do the characters sacrifice too much for what they eventually receive?

6. Are the novels melodramatic? Is melodrama part of their appeal?

7. In the novels, how does the past shape the present? How do characters perceive their own past? How does their perception of the past shape their own actions?

8. How easy to follow are the plot lines? Do they distract from the history?

9. Do Jakes's characters come alive, or are they stereotypes? Are his descriptions vivid or mundane?

Literary Precedents

Precedent for John Jakes's Kent Family Chronicles can be found in the early writings of Howard Fast. Although each novel is limited to a singular historical incident, Fast uses an existing problem in American history to form the basis of his novels. The Last Frontier (1941) is based upon an Indian uprising in 1878 and Freedom Road (1944) revolves around the situations emanating from the Civil War. The Kent Family Chronicles are not that simple; a myriad of historical events are woven into the fiction.

Fast, like Jakes, is prolific. However, Fast's novels invoke different characters and situations and bear no relationship with each other. Jakes links his works and develops them into volumes.

Whereas Jakes in the Kent Family Chronicles portrays the Americans as domineering pioneers in quest of democratic principles, Fast's books emphasize problems in American society. The U.S. Army's attempt to capture the Indian is depicted in The Last Frontier and the crime of slavery is discussed in Freedom Road. Fast is very critical of the country; Jakes depicts it favorably. The Kent family is the ail-American family pursuing the American Dream and epitomizing American heroism. Nonetheless, the authors similarly use historical accounts intertwined with imaginative plots and characters to the extent that fact frequently is indistinguishable from fiction. The historical fiction of both reflects copious research.

Related Titles

Jakes's Bicentennial series follows several generations as the families become part of America's history. The Furies (1976) shows how the Kent family lives through the days of the Wild West. The Titans (1976) deals with the turbulence of the Civil War, whereas The Warriors (1977) depicts the postCivil War period. The Lawless (1978) covers labor unions and their struggle for acceptance. The Americans (1980), which deals with aspects of American life ranging from immigration to practicing medicine in the slums of New York, concludes the panorama.

Shortly after the publication of the Kent Family Chronicles, Jakes created a trilogy which, like its predecessor, is historical fiction. Unlike the Bicentennial series, which appeared in paperback, North and South (1982), the first of the trilogy, appears in hardcover. Similar to his preceding works, North and South is set during the pre-Civil War days and intertwines the stories of true personalities with fictional characters.

North and South encompasses the twenty-year antebellum period and presents two families — the Mains, rice planters in South Carolina, and the Hazards, owners of a flourishing ironworks in Pennsylvania — whose two sons meet at West Point and find themselves on opposing sides of the Civil War. Love and War (1984), the second novel of the trilogy, deals with the Civil War itself and depicts the war as seen from both sides. The third and final novel, Heaven and Hell (1987), is set in South Carolina, Washington, D.C., and along the Western frontier during the era of Reconstruction.

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