Last Go Round Short Guide

Last Go Round by Ken Kesey

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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

Last Go Round has an extensive cast of characters. Among them are the colorful Parson Montanic, "a warrior for Jesus"; a stentorian lady reporter; Cecil Kell, an upright rancher; the bone-crushing Frank Gotch; and a bevy of attractive cowgirls. However, three characters predominate: Johnathan Spain, Jackson Sundown, and George Fletcher.

Spain holds the double roles of narrator and protagonist. He is the nearly ninety-year-old who is shocked by the "gaunt stranger" he sees reflected in the mirror of the Let 'Er Buck Room, an old-timer alienated from the Wide World of Sports broadcasting equipment and fearful that his memories of the first Round Up are too dim to rekindle.

They are not, however, and so we meet through his reminiscences the teenaged youth he once was, who had the time of his life at the Pendleton Round Up.

Jackson Sundown and George Fletcher, "a couple of real old-time dimewestern ripsnorters," serve as mentors to their young acquaintance and as a striking contrast to each other. Sundown is taciturn, stonefaced, and dignified in his three-piece suit and carefully starched shirt. His posture is "ramrod stiff," and his eyes bore through those he perceives. Always in control of his mount and his own actions, Sundown rides with grandeur.

Quite the opposite, George has twinkling eyes, dancing feet, a broad grin, and a teasing wit. With his beat-up saddle and his rundown boots, George does not mind playing the fool; indeed, he does it exceptionally well. A rodeo clown, he is the consummate entertainer, with an agility and suppleness so natural that the audience may not notice them. In the Last Go Round with Jackson Sundown and Johnathan Spain to determine the champion cowboy, George follows his father's advice: "If you're gonna eat watermelon — eat watermelon" by putting on an unforgettable burlesque performance in which he blindfolds his horse and then himself — scattering the crowd and shattering his saddle before he completes his act.

Social Concerns

AlthoughLast Go Round, with its rollicking evocation of rodeo life at the first Pendleton Round Up, is not as psychologically and socially probing a work as One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962) and Sometimes a Great Notion (1964), Kesey does provide thought-provoking commentary on race. Kesey's tall tale centers on three contenders for the title of World Champion Broncobuster: George Fletcher, a Negro former rodeo clown; Jackson Sundown, a Nez Perce Indian; and Johnathan E. Lee Spain, a Caucasian youth from Tennessee. According to Kesey in his introduction, newspaper accounts of the 1911 Pendleton Round Up were "more interested in complexions than achievements." In fact, he observes that in a rare print of the trio, "the complexions are even hand-tinted, to make sure posterity gets the point: one rider's face is tinted Indian copper, one Caucasian pink, one a deep molasses brown." Bigotry abounds in the Wild West, as Kesey reminds his readers in recounting how as a youth, George, the abandoned son of a hotel maid, was not allowed to be baptized with the pure white lambs in the Pendleton church, how Buffalo Bill Cody and his henchmen try to transform the dignified Sundown into a stereotypical wild-haired Indian in breechcloth and warpaint, and how Chinese-Americans and African-Americans were relegated to servile duties. Furthermore, there are those, such as Oliver Nordstrom, who hold sacrosanct the image of the fair-skinned cowboy. However, in Last Go Round, the antibigots prevail. Most of the Pendleton residents respect Jackson Sundown's riding and roping mastery, and even the condescending former Indian scout Buffalo Bill is moved by Sundown's poignant speech in memory of his dead son. As for George Fletcher, he becomes the town's hero, as revealed when the crowd enthusiastically participates in Nadine Rose's plan to purchase him a prize saddle. Moreover, the cowboy representatives of the three races are never adversaries: George and Sundown have been friends since childhood, and Johnny reveres the two elder men as his mentors. Kesey clearly shows that friendship and respect transcend racial distinctions.

In this novel Kesey and Babbs also raise the issue of gender discrimination in rodeo competitions, for women are restricted to such events as Barrel Racing and Trick-and-Fancy Riding. Of the latter event, they note, "The event wasn't actually limited to Womankind Only, but a man would no more have entered a Trick-and-Fancy competition than he would have a biscuit bake-off or a quilting contest. It simply would not have been manly." Longing for an opportunity to demonstrate her equestrian ability, the talented Sarah Meyerhoff is forced to put on face paint and a black wig to participate in the Squaw Race, the only racing opportunity for females at the first Round Up. The crowd in Pendleton see the male events as more significant than the female competitions; thus they view the surprise first Cowgirl Relay Race as merely an entertaining diversion before the Last Go Round finale to determine the All Round World Championship. However, Kesey and Babbs suggest that such riders as Maggie O'Grady, Prairie Rose Henderson, and Sarah Meyerhoff are certainly equal in bravery, determination, and riding skill to the male participants.

Techniques

Like Mark Twain, Kesey celebrates the oral tall tale tradition and derides intellectual pomposity. Therefore he and Ken Babbs chose to bring to life their "three spectral riders out of the old tall tales, told over hot coffee around a warm campfire, instead of the cold facts and half-baked truths served up by library stacks." The novel grew from Kesey's recollection of a story his father told him when he was fourteen — a yarn accompanied by the sounds of crackling flames and the bubbling concoction of Vienna sausages, beans, and sardines. Then when Kesey was a junior at the University of Oregon working on a screenwriting class assignment to produce an outline for a documentary on a town, he visited the Pendleton Round Up. There he met David Sleeping-Good, a thin Indian who introduced him to hot frybread and in a teepee recounted his grandfather's version of the famous first Round Up. Last Go Round is a hybrid form: a novel that is part history — Babbs and Kesey attended the Round Up in 1972 and absorbed the local color of the Let 'Er Buck Room, and later sorted through hundreds of photographs from personal archives and the University of Oregon Library's Moorhouse Collection to select those pictures published in the sixteen pages of their book — and part legend in Kesey's and Babbs's imaginative recapturing of the "high bucking brilliance" of three memorable cowboys transmitted by marvelous storytellers to the authors.

As is appropriate for an initiation story, Kesey employs a retrospective first person point of view as the nearly ninety-year-old Johnathan Spain returns to the Pendleton Round Up. By traveling the rails of his memory, Johnny recalls how he literally traveled the rails from Denver to Pendleton, where he became a bronco star. Johnny relates his exploits in a vernacular filled with homey similes. For instance, he notes of Louise Jubal's response to teasing that "a startling blush rose up her proud neck like the temperature up a weather thermometer" and of his loyalty to George and Sundown asserts, "I stuck with them like a cocklebur sticks to a coyote."

Themes

Last Go Round is a classic initiation story focusing upon Johnathan E. Lee Spain — "scarcely seventeen, brighteyed as a babe, and nearly as naive" — who becomes the first member of his Tennessee family ever to cross the Mason-Dixon line. Through his railroad journey to find "whatever real frontier was still left in our swiftly settling nation" and his subsequent instruction in Pendleton, Oregon under the vigilant eyes of George Fletcher and Jackson Sundown, Johnny learns to relish taking risks — beginning with his leap from the roof of a boxcar into an open wheat gondola to daring to compete for the Best All Round title — a title he eventually wins. In the momentous three days of the Pendleton Round Up, the young protagonist experiences Indian tribal life, becomes cognizant of racial and class distinctions, tests his rodeo skills in a variety of competitive events, and falls in love with the feisty Sarah Meyerhoff. Suddenly Johnny has a goal in attempting to gain the admiration of Sundown, George, and Sarah. He confesses: All my life I've been among gentlemen of state and ladies of distinction. Bluebloods and highborns that I never cared a fig about impressing. Now look at me: I'm busting my dern back to measure up in the eyes of an Indian brave, a Negro man, and a Hebrew girl trying to pass herself off as a squaw!

However, before Johnny can fully mature, he has to lose some of his youthful idealism. That he does, as he endures a dark night of the soul in which he recognizes his "frontier Camelot was turning out to be infested with rats and riddled with weakness and greed." He discovers to his dismay that his fair damsel Sarah prefers racehorses to his company. His Galahads George and Sundown prove to be, at least temporarily, drunkards and targets for the manipulations of Cody and his gang. Johnny also learns that fate is fickle, not rewarding those he cares about most. Thus he witnesses Sarah's horse-racing accident, which causes brain injury. Then later he finds that Sundown has misspent his winnings on a motorcar he is unable to drive, George has become a school janitor, and his "guardian angel" Sue Linn has chosen a career as a lady of the evening. Johnathan Spain's final insight is one gleaned through decades of hard living, including the loss of a hand in a roping mishap: It is that the fourpointed rodeo star he won during his "short high noon of fame" represents the pinnacle of his career; he is forever branded by it.

Key Questions

Last Go Round is a rip-roaring novel intended more for readers' entertainment than for in-depth analysis. Nevertheless readers should enjoy responding to the characters and discussing the effectiveness of the first person point of view. The novel also raises the issue of the blurring of fact and fiction characteristic of many contemporary novels, such as those by Norman Mailer and William Styron.

1. A reviewer described Last Go Round as "a hodgepodge affair, illconceived and poorly crafted." Do you agree with that assessment?

2. Is Kesey and Babbs's choice of presenting their tale as the reminiscence of an almost ninety-year-old former rodeo champion who returns to the Pendleton Round Up effective? Do you like the link the authors draw between Jonathan Spain's literally riding the rails and his riding the rails of his memory?

3. Of what significance are the Civil War allusions in naming the young hero Johnathan E. Lee Spain and his horse Stonewall?

4. From the time an Indian appeared before him in a peyote-induced hallucination that inspired One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Ken Kesey has shown a strong interest in Native American culture, particularly the Indians of the Pacific Northwest. How well do he and Babbs depict tribal life in Last Go Round?

5. What conclusions do readers draw from the characterizations of William (Buffalo Bill) Cody and Frank Gotch?

6. Do you find the female characters in this novel to be resourceful, independent, talented human beings or do they function primarily as sex objects?

7. Does George Fletcher transcend the minstrel stereotype? Does the novel reflect sensitivity to the plight of racial minorities?

8. Do the writers reinforce or question the stereotype of the handsome young Caucasian cowboy?

9. Does the blending of legend and fact in Last Go Round work well? Do the photographs add to readers' enjoyment of the novel?

10. The cover of Last Go Round proclaims it to be "A Real Western." Is it?

How successfully do Kesey and Babbs render the action of a rodeo? Is the novel likely to appeal more to male than female readers?

Literary Precedents

Fred Kesey, the author's father, exerted the most significant influence upon Last Go Round, for it was from his father that Ken Kesey initially heard the story of the first Pendleton Round Up. The novel clearly reflects how well Kesey absorbed his father's ability to weave an action-packed yarn. In addition, Fred Kesey helped prepare his son for writing this novel when he read to him the western romances of Zane Grey. Grey's books inspired Kesey to tackle the subject of "cowboy glories."

Related Titles

Of Kesey's other novels, Last Go Round is most closely related to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. George Fletcher's clowning and desire to be the center of attention recall Randle Patrick McMurphy's behavior, whereas the importance of Jackson Sundown and the portrayal of the Indian camp remind readers of Kesey's continuing interest in Native American culture, which began with his peyote vision of an Indian that inspired his earlier novel.

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