The Last Heroes Short Guide

The Last Heroes by W. E. B. Griffin

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Griffin's characters in this novel are somewhat romantic and romanticized.

It's rare in the novel, and in most Griffin novels, to see an unintelligent, venal, unattractive main character (though some main, often enemy, characters and peripheral characters are so portrayed).

Richard Canidy is a Navy flier with an eye for the ladies and a very pragmatic outlook. To him, flying is a way to make money before he starts a job as an aeronautical engineer for Boeing Aircraft.

There is little pretense and patriotism about Canidy; he is somewhat of a rake, and in typical Griffin fashion, he comes from a respectable background and has friends who are very well-off. Also like the typical Griffin hero, he knows what he is doing; he is efficient, effective, fun-loving, and a little dangerous. This self-assurance, plus his implicit acquiescence at the end of the novel to remain an agent of the OSS, confirms his place in the "Strong American" ethos. Canidy's school-days chum, Eric Fulmar, on the other hand, is mysterious—more so than Canidy—his mother is an American movie star, and his father a German industrialist. His dual background, knowledge, and acquaintances, and his nonchalant nature, make him a natural to be an American agent in occupied France. He, too, because of his American mother, his friendship with Canidy, and the benign nature of his nonchalance, place him in the American camp.

Cynthia Chenowith—whom Canidy likes throughout the novel—is a beautiful young woman with a mind of her own, well-connected (although not wealthy)— all requisites of a Griffin heroine—a woman who can deal with men on their own terms, who has a career (she is an attorney), who is sexually aware (she has an affair with Chesty Whittaker, her unofficial guardian). When Chesty dies, she easily moves into a role with Bill Donovan, founder of the OSS, as his trainer of intelligence agents. Canidy's Navy, and later Flying Tigers, friend Ed Bitter is an upright young Navy officer, more inclined to follow the "correct" or "by the book" solution to a situation—in this, he is the antithesis of Canidy. Still, the two are good friends, fellow Navy pilots, and Bitter must have some streak of adventure in him to volunteer, along with Canidy, for the Flying Tigers. Bitter's conflict, though, is his disapproval of Canidy's loose lifestyle and his falling into that same lifestyle, especially after he makes young college student Sarah Child pregnant.

Social Concerns

The Last Heroes, originally published in 1985 under the pen name Alex Baldwin, was republished under Griffin's name in 1997. The social concerns of The Last Heroes are largely the concerns of the Second World War: the place of a neutral democracy (the United States) in a world dominated by fascist dictators; the place of individuals in a chaotic society; the tenuous relationships between belligerents (Germany and, eventually, the U.S.), neutrals (occupied France and its Moroccan dependency and, at the beginning of the novel, the U.S.), and their citizens; the dramatic change wrought by war on the social and moral lives of men and women; and the moral issues surrounding the development, by the U.S. and Germany, of atomic weapons. It is this latter issue which forms the headnote to the novel and sets the action in motion.

Griffin shows these concerns affecting individual persons in a microscopic, dayin, day-out view the way these persons react to these stimuli. To Griffin's characters, America is superior, and led largely by persons of dash, spirit, and intelligence—persons portrayed the way readers, were they alive at that time, would wish to have been regarded. Thus America must have nuclear capacity, and before the Germans develop the same; its citizens must therefore serve the great adventure that is the wartime United States.

Techniques

Griffin's dialogue and his eye for detail make this book effective; there are few battle scenes, although there are scenes in battle areas. Griffin gives the reader the interstitial details seldom seen in military fiction (or military film): the scenes where motivations are made clear, relationships are begun, fleshed out, and changed; we see offices, cockpits, restaurants, and board rooms, and they become as important as battlefields. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Canidy, Bitter, and their commanding officer "buzz" the field, unannounced, at the June 1941 Annapolis graduation: The Grumman F3F-1, a biplane, was then the standard Navy fighter aircraft. It was powered by a 950horsepower Wright Cyclone engine, which gave it a maximum speed of just about 230 miles per hour ....

. . .As the last three plane V of F3F1s passed over and began to gain altitude,...there came the sound of another—and much noisier—aircraft engine. It was louder because the aircraft was flying at only at about five hundred feet and because the Wright supercharged 1200horsepower engine which powered the Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighter gave off a mighty roar as it powered the stubby silver-bodied monoplane . . . the Wildcat, with its throttle pushed to full military power, had a maximum speed of 330 miles per hour, 100 miles faster than the F3F-1.

And when Chesty Whittaker dies in Cynthia's arms, Captain Peter Douglass and an old boatswain's mate have this interchange before moving the body: "I'm in your debt." Douglass said.

"Since you brought that up, Captain," Ellis said, "I may need a character reference. The candy-ass at the dispensary told me that if I left, he'd have me before a court-martial."

"When you're not at the dispensary, what do you do at the Navy Yard?"

"Work in the arms room," Ellis said. "They don't like China sailors over there, and they don't know what to do with us when we come home."

"Are you married?"

"China sailors don't get married," Ellis said simply.

"Would you like to come work for me?"

"Yes, sir, I would like that."

"You don't know what I do," Douglass said.

"Whatever it is, it looks more interesting than checking out fortyfives to the duty officers and masterat-arms," Ellis said.

Through this interchange the reader learns not only about the characters and their motivations, but also about American social and Naval history as well. Griffin's characters reveal a great deal through their utterances.

Themes

Secrecy is a theme that runs throughout the book. Everyone is keeping secrets from everyone else—Allies from Germans, neutrals from Germans; Roosevelt from his staff, and individuals from each other. These secrets are on the national, organizational, and personal levels. Roosevelt does not seem to confide in J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director; the American Volunteer Group (the famous Flying Tigers) is a secret entity drawn from the ranks of the Navy and Army Air Corps.

Personally, the secrets abound—sexual secrets, political secrets, and secrets about backgrounds. Indeed, with so many secrets (although expected in an espionage novel), it is hardly strange that these secrets are often guessed at by other parties with relative success.

This secrecy is not an evil thing so much as a necessary evil—and even then not all that evil. In this novel, as in most of Griffin's novels, there is a clearly established status quo, which is the superiority of the United States and its way of life. When we have sympathetic nonAmerican characters, such as Eric Fulmar, they still are not quite as sympathetic as Americans; American characters—specifically, the "good guys", like Canidy, Bitter, and the real-life Donovan—are often presented as smart, good-looking, and fortunate individuals. When they must do something seemingly unbecoming—such as Canidy's faked resignation from the Flying Tigers because of cowardice (but really to send him on an important mission), they feel badly, perhaps get drunk, and then get on with their lives and adventures. The AllAmericanness of the novel, the nobility of the tasks behind the American secrecy, then, must perforce permeate the characters, and they must live out this ethos.

Griffin's writing, here and in his other military novels, is indeed a kind of romanticization, but it's romanticizing of the persons and the attitudes, not of war itself; as we are given more of the people and few armed conflict scenes, readers are inevitably drawn to the characters, not battles.

Key Questions

Students may wish to discuss the actions of the early 1940s characters to those of their own time period. How do the young adults in the novel behave differently from those today? How is the fifty-year remove significant; what are the differences in mind set, attitude, world view, and behavior? Are there significant differences, even? Discussing "then and now" issues such as these can be important to help students understand the nature of wartime America.

1. Examine the character of Richard Canidy. Is he a flat or full character?

What techniques does the author use to make him this way?

2. How would you characterize Cynthia as a character? Is she complex, static, developing? Is she a "good" character, a "bad" character, or does she simply exist to further the plot?

3. Some real-life persons—William Donovan, Douglas MacArthur—appear as characters in the novel. Read a biography of these men, and then compare their "real" appearance with Griffin's portrayal of them. What are the differences and similarities of the portrayals?

How do these differences and similarities shape your understanding of the events in the novel?

4. How "real" does the novel seem to you? Compare what you know from the novel to what you may know of more modern intelligence work (not James Bond, but more factual accounts of CIA or FBI intelligence). Does the reality created in the book stand up to "the real thing"?

5. How is The Last Heroes like or unlike other military-based fiction you may have read? Are the characters more or less real? What do you think causes this?

6. How is the general attitude toward war in the novel different from attitudes toward war today? Has the nature of war changed? The nature of people? Both?

Do you think a young officer in the Persian Gulf war would have behaved in the same way, given a similar situation, as Richard Canidy?

Robert Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

There are many twentieth-century writers of military fiction. James Jones's From Here to Eternity (1951; see separate entry) may be similar to Griffin's work in its attention to the detail beyond the battles; the same applies with Herman Wouk's The Caine Mutiny (1951; see separate entry) and Richard McKenna's The Sand Pebbles (1962; see particularly McKenna's attention to the detail of the engine room and power plant of the aging Navy gunboat San Pablo; C. S. Forester's military novels such as The Gun (1933), The General (1936), The Good Shepherd (1955), and the Horatio Hornblower novels (1945-1952), also provide copious background detail.

These are usually on British politics, the nobility, and means of advancement, but also on the rigging and weaponry of a Man-of-War; the detail accorded to personalities and the path for advancement is, though, reminiscent of the military and political struggles of Griffin's military characters. They provide their own unique flavor, but have considerably more battle scenes, as do Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin novels, as well as the novels of Douglas Reeman (who also uses the pen name Alexander Kent), and the cavalry and aviation novels of Max Hennessey. Tom Clancy's Hunt for Red October (1984; see separate entry), Red Storm Rising (1986; see separate entry), and Clear and Present Danger (1989; see separate entry) use detail in similar ways; however, Clancy's details are primarily technologically oriented, and not personally revelatory. Harold Coyle's Team Yankee (1987) is another technically detailed but largely battle-oriented novel, chronicling a Soviet attack into NATO territory through Germany's Fulda Gap.

Related Titles

To an avid, or even an occasional Griffin reader, it is obvious that his more than twenty military and police novels are all, to a degree, related. The Brotherhood of War, Men At War, and The Corps series treat military persons and their interactions with each other, the formation of the military mind set, and the moral and social codes within which they live.

All are distinguished by characters drawn through realistic dialogue; critics have noted in each series the use of arcane details (the specifics of police uniforms, the minutiae of military etiquette, the complexities of family relationships within the same military career path) to set up the reality of the novels. The Brotherhood of War series treats the lives and careers of several US Army officers, many of whom end up as colonels or generals, beginning with America's 1942 North African invasion and ending near the close of the Vietnam war in the 1970s, with a particular focus on the growth of Army aviation. The Men in Blue series, originally issued under a pseudonym (John Kevin Dugan), treating the Philadelphia police department of the 1970s, and in particular that department's Special Operations division, under the direction of Staff Inspector Peter Wohl, assisted by Detective Matt Payne. Important themes in this series are the strength and centrality of family (the Philly police department is often a family affair), and the theme of loyalty—to partners, to family, and to the police department. The Corps series chronicles the adventures of a more widely spread set of characters, ranging from wealthy shipping line owner (and former Marine) Fleming Pickering, who has friends in high places and meets with the mighty, such as McArthur, to Ken "Killer" McCoy, who starts the first novel as a China Marine corporal and then, after acquiring friends who can do his career good, ends up as an officer, performing exciting adventures in the Pacific theatre of war. Common themes in the Corps series are, again, loyalty (especially a deep love for the Corps, though the Corps may not make sense at times) and perseverance in the face of impossible odds (exemplified by the conduct of the soldiers at Corregidor and the Marines at Guadalcanal). In all the Griffin series, the attention to detail, dialogue, and professional trivia characterize the novels.

The Last Heroes was originally issued in paperback in 1985 under the pseudonym of Alex Baldwin (the Griffin name is itself a pseudonym, and he has used at least twenty others in his long career).

Part of a four-book series titled Men at War, The Last Heroes is the first in this series to be reissued under the Griffin name.

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