Liar's Moon Short Guide

Liar's Moon by Philip Kimball

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Characters

Kimball has created and set in motion a large cast of fully realized and individualized characters, each created with economy and wisdom. The African-American cast of characters include The African, a woman who successfully, miraculously somehow (Kimball doesn't tell us how) flees Mississippi with her five children and makes it finally out to the southwest corner of Kansas; Spartacus, Sojourner's husband, who is separated from his wife and family and who spends thirty years searching for them before being united first with his daughter and at last with his wife back in Mississippi; Little Sojourner, known by many other names such as Coyote because she was raised by coyotes and acts and reacts like them but who becomes an expert horse wrangler. Other Africans include Hortense S., who has settled in Nicodemus; Cannonball, who has become Secundo, the secondin-command and then the man in charge of a trail drive and who has found Coyote in the Texas brush and brought her with him; and other Black cowboys.

The white characters, the Euramericans who enter Kansas as well, include the Ole Woman, a restless adventurer, one of the first to try to break the plains, who with the Ole Man, a worthless man, a "sharper" much given to drink, moved with their fourteen kids to the Great Bend Prairie.

Brother, a circuit rider and later owner of the Perpetual Motion Ranch, and Will, the youngest, raised by coyotes, are the only ones we learn about. Prissy Blackstrup, a comely young woman, whose father is the owner of a molasses mill, lives on the Ninnescah River; she has much to do with "civilizing" Will. Autumn Tallgrass, originally a Texan but transformed by her captivity with the Comanches into an Indian, is a character who crosses the boundary of race just as Will and Coyote had crossed the boundary of species. Other Native American characters include Autumn's husband, Coyote Dropping, a visionary and fancy dancer who joins with Buffalo Bill Cody's wild west show and travels to Europe twice.

He dies at Wounded Knee.

Each of these characters is fully realized and unique, made so as much by his or her voice and story as by physical description and actions. Each contributes to Kimball's richly textured narration.

Social Concerns

Myth and legend, tall tale and folktale, narratives crafted in various ways out of the short-grass prairies of Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas—Philip Kimball has them all in his two brilliant novels, Harvesting Ballads (1984) and Liar's Moon (1999). His technique is similar in both books, a seemingly random, communal stream of consciousness that provides a structure out of which emerges the community's understanding of the story. The story of Liar's Moon tells of the settling of Kansas and the Oklahoma Panhandle during and after the Civil War. It fills the psychic space of the central prairies with tall tales full of mythic wisdom and the deeds of extraordinary men and women rather than the gods and goddesses of classical myth, but Kimball's purpose is the same—to explain, heighten, and celebrate the cultural and political origins of the peoples of this area during the nineteenth century. It is a great, heroic, and terrible story, this settling—and unsettling— of the Great Plains, one of great human displacements, and a story about one of the great ecological and human disasters in the history of mankind, one that we are still reckoning with. It is the great defining myth, the heroic story of how we came to be here, on the Great Plains, all of us: Asian, Indian, European, African—some arriving earlier, some later, all pushed by pressures and forces that were little understood at the time. Kimball explains it all.

One story in this nonlinear and multipleheaded narrative focuses on the settling of Nicodemus, Kansas, by Black Americans who went there mostly during and after the Civil War to make a community and a life about thirty-five miles northwest of Hays.

They entered Kansas as refugees from the slave states, as cowboy drovers bringing cattle northward up to Montana, and as "buffalo soldiers," who participated in the genocide of the Indians. And they came also as "sodbusters," farmers who plowed the Great Plains, as well as craftsmen, teachers, preachers, bankers, and scalawags, all transforming and being transformed by the new land. As Kimball tells the stories of these individual Black settlers he reveals the horrors of slavery, the extraordinary courage and endurance required of Black men and women and children as they es caped slavery or later fled the share-cropping bondage of Reconstruction (slavery by another name), and their determination to "get to jumpin'" on the way west to freedom.

Kimball focuses on and defines in his narrative the "frontier spirit," "the pioneer spirit," the capacity for suffering and adaptation that marked the pioneers on the Plains more deeply perhaps than anywhere else.

To tell this story, he adapts a number of traditional forms such as legends, witch tales, tall tales, and folktales. For example: in 1859 a buckboard wagon containing large fragments of two large families, one black and headed by the African, Sojourner, who has run with her children from slavery in Mississippi and is separated from her husband Spartacus; the other family white, headed by the Ole Woman, both indomitable. They have teamed up, and their wagon is pushing deeper and deeper into the Kansas prairie. But crossing the Ninnescah River bounces the two youngest kids, one black and

female, named Little Sojourner, the other white and male, named Will, a "chap of infinite possibilities" out of the wagon.

The toddlers are rescued and reared by coyotes. This, perhaps the principal tale within the novel, is built around the "animal nourishes abandoned child" motif so familiar in much folk literature. Thirteen years later, the kids are "rescued" again and "restored" to "civilized culture" with varying degrees of success and fatality. Thus, Kimball examines the entire concept and definition of "civilization." In several marvelous scenes, told from the point of view of Prissy Blackstrup, the frontier daughter of a mill owner on the banks of the Ninnescah, Kimball reveals the family structure, the care and feeding, and the education of the coyote pack's offspring, which include the two human children. How to hunt, how to eat, how to be alert, how to sing, how to socialize and harmonize—the coyote family's behaviors are played off against those of many of the human settlers on the plains, to the disadvantage of the humans.

The nature of community is a dominant social concern and theme throughout the novel. For example, as black refugees from the Civil War in Mississippi crowd overloaded steamboats they band together to share food, nurse each other through sickness, devise schemes to get on up the Mississippi River to St. Louis and then up the Missouri, the Kansas, and across the prairies to the banks of the Solomon. They bring with them skills as farmers, iron workers, merchants, craftsmen, musicians, workers of all sorts. They bring with them the determination to create and maintain communities despite the continuing presence of racism even on the edge of the frontier.

Ecology is another social issue raised in the novels. Before the prairies were put to the plow, they were grazed by enormous herds of bison that were all but exterminated after the Civil War. Then herds of Texas longhorns were rounded up and moved northward to the nearest railheads in Kansas—Abilene and Dodge City among others. Finally, during this period of time and through the end of the nineteenth century, settlers swarmed into the Great Plains, now bereft of both buffalo and Indian, and plowed the native grasses under, committing a great ecological blunder, little realizing that great climatalogical shifts shaped and reshaped the flora and fauna of the Great Plains and would do so again.

Kimball deftly suggests the nature and impact of these social concerns by bringing together Anglo, Black, and Indian on the plains of Kansas, each of them trying to scratch out a living, trying to survive, trying to make and preserve a family in most instances in the trying conditions of western Kansas, and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles.

Another important social issue explored in these tales concerns the American Indians who hunted and lived on the Great Plains and who are now being overwhelmed by the European and Euramerican immigrants. They are victims of a vicious ethnocentrism and a cultural and national political policy of genocide. One of the plot threads by which this story is told concerns Autumn Tallgrass who is actually a Texan.

Hers is a "captivity narrative," but like most of the other traditional forms in Liar's Moon, it is augmented and given a significant thematic twist by Kimball. Her story is this: In 1852, she is kidnapped by Indians and reared by New Mother whose band is somewhere up in or above the Neutral Strip; several years later she is forcibly repatriated to her Texas family. However, with the help of her Texas family's African slaves, who give her food, she escapes from her family, steals a horse, and returns to her Indian "captors," eating the horse to survive on the way. And later when, as Autumn Tallgrass tells it, she and all the tribes had been rounded up and herded into agencies, when: the evil [had] taken hold . . . of all the folk, ever since the pox and the blizzard, since the medicine went bad, the magic evaporated, fighting the buffalo hunters at Adobe Walls, ever since the folk were chased down by buffalo soldiers and scattered in the early dawn attack along the twisty creek on the floor of Hard Stick Canyon where they had camped secure for every winter that ever was.

Then Autumn Tallgrass and the others had to eat their ponies. Kimball attacks the government's handling of the "Indian problem," the wanton destruction of the buffalo, the consequent destruction of the Indian cultures, and, finally, of the ecology of the Great Plains. It is an issue elaborated and made clear by the stories of what happens to Autumn Tallgrass's husband, Coyote Dropping, a visionary dancer who, after two European tours with Buffalo Bill Cody's "wild west show," "returns" to a tribal context—not his own—and dies under the Hotchkiss guns and Sharps rifles trained by Custer's old outfit on the largely unarmed Indians gathered peacefully in a bend of the creek known as Wounded Knee in 1890.

Kimball's tone is laconic and detached and sometimes elegiac in these individual stories, which sing, as it were, an old, sad song about the demise of a once proud and complex culture as it is overwhelmed by new technologies and new diseases.

Kimball also tells other stories of the tribes, the first emigrants into these plains, peoples who had been there for thousands of years before the Europeans showed up, of their defeats at the hands of Euramericans, their starvation and their sicknesses, and of their efforts to bring the buffalo back through the magic and ritual of Wovoka, the cutter, the prophet, that would restore the old life.

The Ghost Dance of the 1880s, for instance, attempted to call "the lost herds of buffalo and elk, all the deceased ancestors home."

What is the nature and power of a world view when its ecological and economic base has been destroyed? What are the resources left for a people bereft of all that had nourished and sustained it for hundreds, indeed, in a slightly different form (before horses were inserted) for thousands of years?

The Indians, unable to defeat the Euramericans by military resistance, resort to a set of traditional remedies, visions, and "medicine," rituals to enact their bravely marshaled beliefs. Instead, however, of bringing back the buffalo and defeating the invaders, the Indians, even those who had gone with "Buffalo Bill" Cody and the Wild West shows, continue to experience the destructive consequences of military defeat. These include

reservation policies of slow starvation and of quicker disease and, after 1887, the political consequences of the Dawes Act, a kind of massacre by indirection. The genocide continued under the guise of dividing and allotting the reserva tion land to individuals in ten- and fortyacre plots, which many Indians would then sell or lease to white ranchers and farmers, for pennies, leaving the Indians without any sort of home. Thus, the policy was to kill off the buffalo and clear the Great Plains of the source of life and sustenance for the tribes, then engage in a few little mopping up operations like the Battle of Adobe Walls, the massacre of Black Kettle's band on the Washita, and the massacre at Wounded Knee (1890). These events, coupled with the murder of Sitting Bull and other tribal leaders, destroyed any hope of restoration once and for all.

Techniques

Kimball's techniques in this novel are rich and complex, his style a wide register of oral tale telling put unerringly to paper.

Part of his story is a heightened comic celebration of terrible suffering and disasters and courage, seen especially in the stories of the Ole Woman and her children, in particular Brother and Will. Kimball encases an epic theme of the displacement of one elaborate, rich, and ancient social and economic order with another one by an invading force of Europeans from the east and the Africans, brought in chains to America and now freed after the Civil War. A concurrent part of Kimball's story comprises an elegy, a long lament for the destruction of the great Indian horse-andbuffalo cultures of the Great Plains. This "long tale" is told in episodic sequences from the points of view of several major characters who sometimes speak in their own voices directly. But sometimes their positions are rendered by an omniscient narrative voice that gracefully assumes the perspective of the group from whom the story springs: Black cowboys, homesteaders, and strong women; Indian dancers, warriors, and mystics; Anglo "heroes," soldiers, and politicians. As a result of this overall narrative strategy, Kimball's story emerges as a mosaic, a patchwork quilt, a story told in many voices from many perspectives, all, it seems, speaking at once to render this rich and complex and messy story of the epic transformation of the Great Plains in fifty short years.

Kimball's use of folkloric motifs and devices gives the narrative that special quality appropriate to the larger story that is both elegiac and comedic, a confession that all of us, even now, are a part of this great and complex myth. Kimball has said, in the context of discussing his narrative aims and techniques in Harvesting Ballads, his brilliant first novel (the second, however, in the trilogy of which Liar's Moon is the first volume), that his aim is to recreate the community's way of discovering "the story," its story, through the fragments remembered and known by various members of the community who then, in various ways and with various voices reassemble "the story" and make it known in a new form.

Thus, the tall tales like the ones that Brother, a defrocked itinerant preacher, tells about the Pacing White Stallion, function to enact important values that are part of a subculture's world view. Brother's story of the Pacing White Stallion or Pegasus "as people called him, cause they swore he either ran faster than any horse ever had before or else he could fly," is an example of the tall tale in action. At this point in the novel, Will, the baby boy who had been raised by coyotes on the banks of the Ninnescah, was, according to Brother, "talking pretty good . . . been living out in the bunkhouse [on the Perpetual Motion Ranch] with the boys, picking up such skills as cigarette rolling and tobacco chewing, yarn spinning, even known to take a drink now and then." Will has been initiated into the cowboy subculture, perhaps not such a great transition from the coyote subculture as it might seem, according to Kimball. Will has a plan to capture this magnificent wild horse, so: Every night Will would go out and sit by the water [Wild Horse Lake in the Neutral Strip, the Panhandle] and sing. The frogs would join in, then the coyotes. Looked like something we'd never be able to break him of. Told me he was

telling his friends to let the stallion know he was here waiting for him, wanted to ride him, if he thought he was horse enough to take him on. A trick, he said, he learned in the bunkhouse, how to bait a man [by] casting aspersions on his virility. I had to laugh, a wild child learned his language from a defrocked preacher, a pack of itinerant cowboys, and the African, who spent all those lonesome years on this windswept flatlands reading the complete works of Shakespeare and a Bible she'd traded some traveler a pound of fatback for.

And it works. On an evening that is full of the electrical atmospherics of an approaching storm, the Pacing White Stallion shows up on the other side of the lake and Will stalks him, keeps his eyes hard on those of the horse who, as Brother narrates it: rears up, slashing the air with his front hooves, Will keeps on coming, the horse moves two more steps back. Looks like Will's saying something to him, upper lip and nose quivering: you're an insult to the noble Spanish steeds who overspread this prairie, I've ridden broomsticks tougher than you are. Finally right up in the stallion's face.

Then the storm strikes. Lightning! A cyclone is upon them.

The stallion starts at all this, looks over his shoulder, Will, louring, lurking for this moment of inattention, leaps, grabs the exposed throat, and swings up on his back. The stallion panics, whirls, slinging clods, tufts of grass, to face the vortex. A roaring wasn't there before, broken twigs and limbs revolving high above them.

Whips his tail back and forth, a few mincing steps, begins to spin and buck. Takes off. Floats, slowly turning above the troubled waters of Wild Horse Lake, Will, knees locked around the barrel chest, arms hugging the neck, lets out a spirited yippee-ti-yay.

They sail over my head and disappear into the boiling blue-black clouds.

A strange elation at the spectacular demise of my brother, ecstasy at the center of power greater than ourselves.

Brother, the narrator of this wonderful and deeply significant yarn, picks up his stuff and heads back up to the shack when, as he says: I'd gone a quarter mile, hopeless, and then I heard singing, saw the white horse prancing along the rise above me through twisted and matted-down johnsongrass and sunflowers, Will sitting back puffing on a cigarette he must've rolled with his left hand in full flight. You could tell from the look in the stallion's eyes he was his: anybody take me on a ride like that, somebody I'm sticking with.. . . 'Brother, I think I'll call him Widow Maker.'

So here we have a huge and wonderful and joyful tall tale, the Coyote boy capturing his mount, the magnificent and mythic White Stallion. But of course happiness is not the result. Tragedy comes from this Pecos Bill-like effort.

The stories that wind up the novel now cluster around Will and Coyote, also known as Little Sojourner, told not only by Brother but also by Cannonball, who has gone from slave to cowpuncher and trail boss to ranch hand (no better than a slave he says) to a Pullman Car Porter who shines the shoes of rich folks traveling in style and tells stories

about the good old days. And, after Will died, you see, other people got started talking "telling lies about him." "People will tell you any damn thing." And then Brother tells how, shortly before Will died, he came across Will and Sojourner on a "long summer evening, out on the highland a couple miles from the river." The passage recalls an earlier Eden, a garden of unselfconscious innocence. He approaches from downwind, so they didn't hear or smell him coming, and finds them "lying on the ground, Will on his back, Sojourner cuddled up beside him. Naked. Could tell by the way they snuggled and fondled they'd just finished coupling. Like the wild animals they still were, yet different." Different, of course, because they have been educated, trained in the ways of modern human beings. Therefore they have "fallen" from the state of primordial or Edenic innocence into experience. Kimball's prose, cast in Brother's speech, the speech of this defrocked circuit riding preacher, speech that is therefore informed by the rhythms of the Bible, is perhaps the most poetic of any passage in the book. Brother tells us that he "stood there watching them. They sniffed, chortled, woofed, and wooed, the grass, the summer drought, the low sun, a burning gold scrim of dust." Brother has a vision that the prairie: looked then just like it had before the first Asians ventured out onto it: all of us, the Asians, the Africans, the Ole Woman, Will, Sojourner, all of us reaped and winnowed on this enormous thrashing floor, broken loose from history it seemed, annihilated, made over, the troubles, suffering, the absolute beauty of it stronger than any bonds to anything that came before. It isn't blood that makes us all brothers and sisters, it's the distances, bluestem and grama grass, prickly pear, wind and thunderstorm, grasshopper, coyote, antelope, turkey vulture, and the red-tailed hawk.

Here is a Wordsworthian vision of nature and a brotherhood between humans and the rest of nature, a brotherhood brokered by these two lovers, each from a different race, raised by coyotes on the prairie after being "bounced" from a wagon so packed with humanity that it functions as a symbol of the masses soon to overrun and destroy this vast garden. But then his vision darkens as he "looked closer. In the lengthening shadows, the long straight lines of fence post and barbed wire. Then, carried on warm summer air, a windmill creaking, clanking from the river bottoms, and the baleful whistle of a train." Here, in these two sentences, Kimball summarizes the principal symbols of the transformation of the Plains, a darkling transformation, the call of quail and plover replaced by the baleful whistle of. a train that brought death to Indian and buffalo followed by commerce and settlers and, eventually, the Dust Bowl.

Kimball switches tone now to the tall tale, employing a traditional story that deflects the pain and loss of the transformation with humor. Brother continues his narration with: I don't care what stories you've heard, I'll tell you what happened to Will. It was when I decided to sell the place. I had wanted to keep it at first, continue the work the Ole Woman started. Despite the big blizzard of '81—killed most of our cows, the beginning of the end to look back on—despite the drought that didn't seem like would ever be broken. . . . I put the Perpetual Motion Ranch up for sale.

Didn't make any sense trying to keep it, worth a lot more on the market than we'd ever make cutting hay and raising cows, and if there were fools enough to pay that much money for it, I'd be a fool not to take it. I didn't tell Will what I was up to. When he saw

the first prospective buyer coming along the lane, a Boston man decked out in his brand-new mail-order cowboy outfit, he just laughed himself to death.

Weaving together these various threads, Kimball creates his long "tall tale" that tells more truth than the most scholarly of dissertations. Such is the power of story. Such is the power of Kimball's exuberant yet subtle craft. Such is the power of contemporary myth-making that tells new-old stories about old-new lives, about how the "territory was settled," about the folks who came into the territory, about, finally, the only thing that matters, the stories that fill the open and windy spaces of the territory— and more importantly, the open and windy spaces of our hearts, we who have left the territory physically but who return to it every day of our lives.

Themes

The theme of identity and how it is created, performed, enacted, recognized, and preserved is another major thread to Kimball's story. "Black Woolly," the female raised by the coyotes, known as Little Sojourner before the coyotes took her up, becomes an adept horse wrangler and cowboy; most people who see her do not recognize her gender. This confusion, disguise or shape shifting, adds yet another motif to the story mix: the cross-dressed female in a "man's world" doing a man's job. The pioneer woman assumes here a somewhat different guise from that represented by the statues raised to her in such disparate locales as Ponca City, Oklahoma, and Upland, California.

Will, the white boychild raised as "Black Woolly's "littermate" by the coyotes, receives, as is traditional in the hero tale, assistance from a woman, Prissy Blackstrup, who teaches him how to become human, including, as is true with Enkidu in the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, the arts and practice of sexual intercourse.

After his initiation, Enkidu's animal friends then avoided him. Will's coyote buddies, according to one of several versions served up in the story about Will's ultimate fate, are offended by Will's initiation. According to Autumn Tallgrass he was done in by the coyotes for bringing civilization to the Great Plains.

Interestingly, one of the enduring themes of the novel is brotherhood. This is connected to a number of the social concerns analyzed above and enacted first of all in Brother's name and in his search for "the creatures," the two children bounced from the wagon and raised by coyotes. One of them is Will, his brother identified by the jayhawk tattooed on his left wrist. Brother is a preacher, an itinerant circuit rider who preaches the brotherhood of Christ. He finds Will and Little Sojourner with the aid of Autumn Tallgrass, who is not named in the episode but whose identity we learn by piecing together the evidence as it emerges, a technique that Kimball uses to recreate the informal and inferential process by which knowledge is acquired in the community.

He has termed this the story-telling technique of the short-grass prairie. Later in the story, Brother employs. Cannonball and other black cowboys on the Perpetual Motion Ranch that the Ole Woman and Sojourner had claimed in 1859 on the far southwest prairie of Kansas in what is probably now Stevens or Morton County. But it is the brotherhood with all living creatures, a harmony punctuated with the realities of the human condition to "take dominion" over all of nature, that most of the narrative expresses, especially in the long, wonderfully realized scene in which Brother endures an ecclesiastical trial of sorts, Will at his side, his coyote nature barely contained.

In a beautifully ironic commentary on the Christian notion of the brotherhood of mankind in Christ, the crowd at the trial attempt to lynch Brother and Will after learning that Prissy Blackstrup taught Will how to cook his food and finally had sex with Will to teach him to be human again. In one sense, of course, one might call this an ecological theme, a theme of primordial innocence.

But in another, larger sense, it is the question of what makes us human, and KimbalTs story suggests that it is human society, communication, touch, and finally love that make us human. It is a powerful theme, one explored in many ways throughout the novel.

Key Questions

Three areas of inquiry may be especially fruitful of excellent discussions. Studying the forms and functions of American folklore as analyzed by books such as Barre Toelken's The Dynamics of Folklore; Richard Dorson's Folklore and Folklife, and Jan Brunvand's The Study of American Folklore will provide information helpful to understanding the nature and function of folklore in Liar's Moon; examining the history of the European and Euramerican invasion of the Great Plains in, for example, Elliott West's The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado (1998) will provide historical context.

1. Analyze the function of the tall tale about Will's capturing Pegasus, the Pacing White Stallion. What are the societal and cultural values enacted in the story? How does its form and manner of telling function to advance Kimball's narrative purposes? Identify and analyze other forms of verbal folklore present in the novel. What thematic functions do they serve? How do they advance Kimball's narrative purpose?

2. Research the presence and function of the Black cowboy and the Black (or "Buffalo" soldier) in the settlement of the American West. Discuss how Kimball uses these sorts of historical facts in his fiction.

3. Research the settlement of "Black" logical beginning of Kimball's novel is?

towns like Nicodemus, Kansas, after Its ending? the Civil War in Kansas, Oklahoma, and elsewhere. What was their pur-8. Read Kimball's Harvesting Ballads (1984) pose? Are any of them still left? (Con-and reflect on his analysis of the changes sider Boley and Langston in Oklahoma, that have taken place from the 1940s for instance.) How do they function in through the 1960s on the Great Plains this day and age of full integration and as portrayed in this novel. What concivil rights? clusions might one draw about Kimball's attitude toward this huge section of our 4. Research the military campaigns against country, its geography, history, econothe Indians in the Great Plains. Read, mics, and the people who live or have for instance, Elliott West's The Contested lived within it. Compare that perspecPlains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush tive with those of Frazier and West. to Colorado (1998) to discover more about 9. The story of how Black Woolly (also the total environmental and cultural known as Little Sojourner and Coyote) contexts of the disasters that overtook and Ninnescah Will were bounced out the Plains Indians. Compare your find-of the wagon and raised by coyotes is ings with your reading of Liar's Moon. one that runs in various ways throughEvaluate the different narrative tech-out the novel. What does it contribute niques of West, an academic historian, to Kimball's themes and narrative purand Kimball, a novelist. pose? Research the analogues of this tale in the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type5. Research the "Wild West" shows of Buffalo Bill Cody, the Miller Brothers of Index to get some perspective on this ancient story type. the 101 Ranch, Pawnee Bill, and others.

What did these popular spectacles con-10. Slavers, men who tracked and appretribute to the mythologizing of the West? hended runaway slaves, appear early Why were they so popular? What re-in Liar's Moon and are quickly vanplaced them after the 1920s? quished by the Ole Woman. Research the efforts of slaves, especially those in 6. Read Ian Frazier's Great Plains (1989) the border states, to escape to freedom and Melvin R. Gilmore's Prairie Smoke and the nature and work of those who (1929, 1987) and compare and contrast sought to capture and bring slaves back the vision of both the Plains themselves to their "owners." It might be helpful and the peoples, Native American and to read the works of Frederick DougEuropean, who inhabited them. lass and Toni Morrison, especially her Beloved, to gain an understanding of 7. Evaluate the function and purpose of what courage and effort it took to "run Kimball's narrative methods. How effor freedom."

fective do you think the multiple and shifting narrative point of view is? What 11. Read the history of Kansas as an imporis gained and what is lost by his choice tant pre-Civil War battleground over of this method as opposed to a straight-the issue of slavery. Discuss Kimball's forward, single-voiced narrative that use of this social and historical backbegins at a particular and defined point ground for his story. How, for instance, of time and ends at a particular point? does his blend of folktales including Where do you think the actual chrono-folk history enhance or impede our understanding not only of what happened but why it happened and the effects of what happened in the Central Great Plains during the nineteenth century?

Literary Precedents

Kimball has written that the central influence on his writing is not literary at all. It is rather "the shortgrass storytelling style of the prairie community I was born into and [I] attempt to translate that into a literary style. . . . My dad was one of the best storytellers of that tradition, but only one of many—hence my interest [in] and love of multiple narrators" (private e-mail, 11/6/ 00). From that folk tradition, Kimball developed the seemingly random, communal stream of consciousness structure of Harvesting Ballads which carried over in everevolving form to his second novel, Liar's Moon. But he has confessed to several literary models, including James Joyce—mainly the use of the stream of consciousness technique in Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake. Both works also include revelations about works of literature based on other works of literature, and Kimball employs this technique as well. Kimball also acknowledged Thomas Pynchon's V (1963) as an important example of nonlinear narration, of disparate stories which the reader believes must all fit together somehow. Ken Kesey's Sometimes A Great Notion (1964) and Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1964) "should be mentioned with their tangled and various plotlines." Kimball also claimed another, nonliterary, influence on his plot development. He wrote: "in my youth you never worried about when a movie started, you just went and walked into the theater, sat down and started trying to figure out who was who and what was going on until you got to that point when someone would say 'this is where we came in.'" He continued, "Then there's German poetry in general and Rilke in particular—a great influence on my intensity of observation (to the extent that such is apparent in my work—the texts are chock-full of snatches of Rilke, Hoffmannsthal, Eichendorf, Gottfried Benn, etc)" (private e-mail, 11/6/00).

Kimball has a very interesting quality of mind, one which, in the same e-mail, he characterized as being: for most things . . . disadvantageous, but for a fiction writer works out well: it is form, not content [that sticks]. I can pick up something I read last week and it will be like beginning a new work. The material fuses in the shallow but slippery puddle of my imagination. My mind does not respect intellectual property rights. . . . I make no distinction between something I think and something someone else thinks, a story in the New York Review or one overheard in the Bloomington hardware store. I suppose, like it or not, I am at heart (or at brain) postmodern (which may not be much different from premodern).

Related Titles

Kimball's first book, Harvesting Ballads (1984), although written and published first, follows Liar's Moon (1999) in its place in the projected "Prairie Trilogy." Its action takes place, counting flashbacks, from about 1885 to the 1980s and ranges over the Great Plains from a farm in Oklahoma near Piedmont to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. And, if one considers its "Prologue Two," Kimball takes us back one hundred million years to the origins of the Great Plains and to the emergence of all of the forms of life that have occupied that huge sweep of space from dinosaurs to rodeo riders, wheat farmers, and WCTU members. Its "Prologue Three" surveys those who settled the prairies.

In fact, the central figure's great-grandfather seems identical with the Ole Man, the alcoholic horse trader that we meet in Liar's Moon. Powerfully and uniquely written, Harvesting Ballads continues a saga of the Everyman on the Plains as it traces Sorry's coming to knowledge of his heritage.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
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I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994