The Lonely Silver Rain Short Guide

The Lonely Silver Rain by John D. MacDonald

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Characters

In Travis McGee, hero and narrator of the series, MacDonald has created a figure who combines convention and originality in striking fashion. Tough, solitary, resourceful, and romantic, McGee is no sharp departure from the conventional hero of the mystery/thriller genre. At the same time, he is no carbon copy either: His basic lifestyle, taking his retirement "in chunks" until he runs out of money, has a satiric force, and his standard working arrangement, "salvaging" what is hopelessly lost for fifty percent of its value, is unusually pragmatic. Another original feature of the character is his voice as narrator of the novels. Skeptical, articulate, witty, and unfailingly moralistic, McGee constantly examines his world and himself, and the quick pace of the action frequently gives way to leisurely reflection — even homily.

The sense of moral emptiness in the novels is largely a product a McGee's own observations. At the same time, he is an ardent advocate of the pleasures of life: His narratives are full of the joys of food, drink, friends, music, sex, fishing, and living on and with boats and the sea. In these things, McGee clearly finds an antidote to the relentless decay of his world.

His companion, Meyer, is similarly blended of conventional and unconventional elements: He is a foil for McGee in that he is less capable and experienced in the world of McGee's salvage operations; he is at the same time — and by mutual consent — McGee's intellectual superior, a keen analyst adept at interpreting the evidence McGee collects during a case and at interpreting McGee himself. At the same time, he is a notable personality in his own right, thoroughly extroverted and equally at home on beach, boat, or at an international monetary conference. It is noteworthy that, unlike sidekicks from Conan Doyle's Watson to Rex Stout's Archie Goodwin, Meyer is not the narrator of the novels; indeed, the stereotyped functions of Holmes and Watson are split up in surprising ways between McGee and Meyer and vary widely from novel to novel.

The villains of the series also vary through a wide spectrum. Ruffi, the antagonist of The Lonely Silver Rain, is both victim and corrupter: On the one hand, he is another of the offspring whose assorted fates are central to the narrative and is himself an addict and a runaway; on the other hand, he is active in drug trafficking and is responsible — directly or indirectly — for all the novel's other victims. He is the most grotesquely empty figure in the novel; although circumstance and dependency have contributed, he appears as much the same "sociopathic" type as many of MacDonald's other villains. The term, now out of fashion among psychiatrists but popular in the 1960s, denotes a deep-seated personality disorder that leaves the subject incapable of empathy, of any sense of the humanity or even the reality of others; the result is a hostile but amoral figure, clever, often compelling, but utterly unrestrained. Clearer examples of the type can be found throughout the McGee series, most notably perhaps in The Deep Blue Goodbye (1964), Bright Orange for the Shroud (1965), A Tan and Sandy Silence (1971), and Free Fall in Crimson (1981).

Social Concerns

Contemporary American society provides far more than the setting for MacDonald's Travis McGee novels; it directly generates the problems McGee encounters in each of them and clearly spawns the antagonists McGee must overcome. From The Deep Blue Goodbye, where Junior Allen preys on the young and uncertain female victims of newfound social and sexual freedom, to The Lonely Silver Rain, whose villain embodies both the organizers and the victims of the South Florida drug trade, MacDonald offers readers an always critical, often bitter view of American culture. In fact, the series as a whole constitutes a thoughtful if informal social history of the last twoand-a-half decades of American life.

Although McGee's adventures sometimes take him far afield, MacDonald's Florida offers an environment conducive to revealing cultural extremes. It is at once the home of assorted social renegades (boat bums like McGee, for example, or free-lance figures like Meyer, the self-employed economist entirely without formal affiliations); the haven for victims of various problems in other parts of the country; the epitome of American commercialism, preying alike on residents, tourists, and retirees; and a laboratory setting for the examination of social and political corruption. In The Lonely Silver Rain, MacDonald focuses on organized crime and cocaine trafficking. The characters include a range of Mafiosi, from smalltime thugs to big-time mobsters to the head of a giant money-laundering organization. The Drug Enforcement Administration agents and the Coast Guard are both represented as utterly ineffectual; the only competent lawenforcement official is one local policeman. A comparable range of victims is offered, from two juvenile boat thieves to the runaway daughter of a Peruvian diplomat to an eleven-year-old girl addicted and seduced near the novel's end.

Techniques

The plots of the Travis McGee novels are comparatively uncomplicated.

Although McGee (and Meyer, when present) must generally collect evidence and make deductions, discovering the identity of culprits is not usually the central concern. As in The Lonely Silver Rain, the villain is often identified by events rather than by detective work, and although surprises are common at the end of the novels, they only rarely involve discoveries of identity. Instead, the model for the Travis McGee plot is the hunt, with McGee stalking his quarry, using various forms of concealment, reacting to changing circumstances, and finally moving in. Subplots are common, involving McGee's relationships with subsidiary figures encountered in the course of the operation.

Characterization is probably MacDonald's finest skill as a writer. He develops character mainly through dialogue, and he has an extraordinarily acute ear for the rhythms of real speech and for those clues which give away regional background, social class, and fundamental traits of personality. Although the characters often seem familiar, they are rarely stereotypes. The longtime reader of MacDonald will recognize patterns of convention and variation, but the conventions are MacDonald's own — such as the small town Florida lawman, running the gamut from total integrity (Harry Max Scorf, in The Dreadful Lemon Sky, 1974, is one of the best examples; the type is seen also in Captain Wesley Davenport in The Lonely Silver Rain) to total corruption (as in the case of Lew Arnstead in The Long Lavender Look, 1970). Such autonomous conventions serve to establish, from novel to novel, the sense of a distinct fictional world.

In description as in dialogue, MacDonald develops impressions out of small details rather than painting complete portraits or landscapes, but the world of the novels is sensuous and finely observed. The MacDonald/McGee style is generally straightforward, paratactic, and conversational in tone, as befits first-person narration. Its peculiarities, observable after some acquaintance, lie primarily in diction; MacDonald is inordinately fond of the word "texture," for example. Only in descriptions of sex is the writing noticeably stylized, but the result reinforces McGee's half-libertine, half-puritanical attitude.

One notable feature of MacDonald's fiction is the frequency of embedded narratives — brief anecdotes or stories that can serve as illustrations for McGee's reflections or as illuminating background for a character. They often contribute to the thematic development of a novel. A good example occurs in The Lonely Silver Rain when DEA Agent Browder tells the story of his daughter's death: Not only does the account contribute to understanding Browder's motivation and help win him sympathy; it also adds from outside the immediate narrative another young victim to the toll — and provides a striking foil to the character who makes a surprise appearance at the novel's end.

Themes

Like all the Travis McGee novels, The Lonely Silver Rain deals with readily identified social concerns, but the novels are never simply topical; invariably, more general issues are raised, and these can be seen recurring throughout the series. In The Lonely Silver Rain, the cocaine problem of the mid-1980s provides the immediate subject matter, but a more basic sense of corruption and loss of values is evident both in this novel and in the series as a whole. In detective-novel convention, for instance, the client is invariably a sympathetic figure — perhaps foolish or naive but fundamentally innocent. In The Lonely Silver Rain, McGee's client is disturbingly unsympathetic: a retired real estate developer whose years of aggressive business dealings culminate in the sudden collapse of his wife during the construction of a long-awaited dream home and who remarries his gold-digger ex-secretary. They seem, on the whole, to deserve each other, and neither his death nor her bereavement is particularly moving or important. Add a variety of incidental details from the novel's background — the mindless tourists in Mexico, the architectural ruins and human remnants of Mayan civilization (a feature of many of the novels, especially Dress Her in Indigo, 1969, and Cinnamon Skin, 1982, that it becomes almost a metaphor for MacDonald's world), the dilapidated condominium called Plaza del Rio, and the senseless violence reported in a Ft.

Lauderdale paper ("A thirteen-year-old girl had shot a fourteen-year-old boy to death in a dispute over whose turn it was to ride a bicycle. Everyday stuff."); the overall impression is of a universal erosion of values.

Adaptations

Twenty-seven of MacDonald's detective stories have been adapted for television. Although movie rights to six of his novels have been purchased, none have been produced yet, although in late 1995 it was anounced that Harrison Ford would star in the role of Travis McGee in at least one, and perhaps several, films that would be scripted from a composite of the whole body of work.

Literary Precedents

The precedent most openly invoked in the Travis McGee novels is that of the quest. McGee often refers to himself in chivalric terms, although disparagingly: He rides a swaybacked steed, his armor is rusty, and the grail is tarnished. In this connection, Don Quixote is often mentioned as a forebear by both Meyer and McGee. The model of Cervantes is appropriate to the satiric quality of the novels, but at the same time McGee's salvage operations include many elements of the traditional quest-narrative whose archetypal appeal may make an important contribution to the success of the novels. Most basic, perhaps, is the motif of death and rebirth. In The Lonely Silver Rain, McGee makes a voyage to the underworld when he discovers the missing cruiser (note its two ironic names: Sundowner and Lazidays); other, more compelling examples occur in The Green Ripper (1979), whose entire plot may be viewed as such a journey, and in episodes of Nightmare in Pink (1964), The Scarlet Ruse (1973), and especially A Tan and Sandy Silence.

Related Titles

The Lonely Silver Rain is in a sense the belated sequel to Pale Gray for Guilt (1968), although to explain how would spoil the novel's end. It also continues a long-term development of McGee's character that begins with The Empty Copper Sea (1978). In fashion recognizable throughout literary tradition, McGee as the satiric observer of society begins himself to exhibit comparable flaws. Throughout the past five novels, there is increasing attention paid to the hollow quality of McGee's life; in a bold departure from series and character convention, McGee is visibly aging, and his bachelor existence seems less like an attractive fantasy and more like a sort of psychological — even spiritual — emptiness of its own. At the same time the world of the novels becomes more threatening: The hope extended at the end of The Empty Copper Sea is snatched away at the beginning of the next novel; The Green Ripper — in which McGee effectively loses his identity in an extraordinary quest for revenge — introduces international terrorism; Free Fall in Crimson depicts a sociopathic institution of sorts and claims Meyer as a psychological victim; Cinnamon Skin centers on that most horrifying of present American trends, the serial murderer; and The Lonely Silver Rain involves the apparently unstoppable corruption of organized crime, against which McGee's success, although real, is insignificant. Yet at the end of this novel there comes a development which holds out the promise at least of a new involvement for McGee — maybe a salvation.

Pale Gray for Guilt, the ninth novel in the Travis McGee series, may be more typical of the series as a whole than The Lonely Silver Rain. The bulk of McGee's adventures do not involve adversaries on the scale of the organized crime world of contemporary South Florida; in this earlier novel the antagonists are a variety of individual figures involved in unscrupulous real estate development in fictional Shawana County, Florida. The victim, whose murder is the starting point for the main plot, is Tush Bannon, a friend of McGee, who is trying to run a small marina on ten acres of waterfront property coveted by locals for resale to a large corporation. The novel revolves around an assortment of business deals and dealers — realtors, lawyers, bankers, a prosperous citrus grove owner, a Miami speculator, and even Meyer, whose Wall Street expertise is crucial to McGee's salvage operation. What emerges is a satiric portrait of American commerce during the high-growth years of the late 1960s. In fact, real estate development is a frequent element in the McGee novels and is usually associated with their villains — see The Girl in the Plain Brown Wrapper (1968) and The Empty Copper Sea.

A related concern in Pale Gray for Guilt is ecological: The development of Shawana County is seen as corrupting not only the people involved but the environment. This too is a staple of MacDonald's fiction, seen especially in McGee novels such as The Dreadful Lemon Sky and also in many novels outside the series, from A Flash of Green (1962) to Barrier Island. As Tush Bannon says of the first corporation to move into the county,". . . Tech-Tex Applications. A nice clean industry, except every now and then any fool fish that comes up the Shawana turns belly-up and floats back down. And

sometimes there's a funny little smell, sort of like ammonia, and the tears run down your face. But they employ four hundred people, Trav. Big tax base . . ."

As in The Lonely Silver Rain, the social concerns of this novel are thematically central, but another constellation of themes emerges as well, one closely connected to the development of McGee's character in more recent books.

These are themes reflected in McGee's personal life and focus on permanence and commitment and the importance of family. McGee himself comments early in the novel, "I am aware of what every single unwed person knows — that the world is always a little out of focus when there is no one who gives the final total damn about whether you live or die. It is the price you pay for being a rambler, and if you don't read the price tag you are a dull one indeed."

The issue is reflected in the contrast between McGee's temporary relationship with Puss Killian and the permanence ironically exemplified by two widows, Jan Bannon and Connie Alvarez, and their children. It is deepened at the novel's end by Puss's unexpected letter — and then deepened further by the assorted parent-child relationships of The Lonely Silver Rain and by that novel's own surprise ending.

Apart from McGee and Meyer, the significant characters of Pale Gray for Guilt fall into two groups. The first is the array of McGee's antagonists; they are alike in sharing responsibility for Bannon's death and in a general unconcern for the human costs of their actions. Again, MacDonald's villains seem to embody evil without knowing it, as if it were an entity essentially independent.

The second group of characters consists of the women of the novel, again a various group. MacDonald's female characters avoid stereotypes, although wide experience with his fiction will reveal parallels; Chookie McCall from Bright Orange for the Shroud seems to anticipate Puss Killian. The clearest trait the present group shares is a certain fundamental competence. There are few helpless women in MacDonald's world. What distinguishes the admirable women of the novel from Mary Smith, the one woman among the antagonists, is a concern for intangibles, a sense of commitment, and a refusal to use their sexuality except in the service of a genuine emotional bond. This concern for involvement matches McGee's own scrupulous and self-examining stance (tough as he is, he is not a true descendant of Sam Spade) but also exceeds it, once again setting up the conditions which will precipitate the surprise development of The Lonely Silver Rain.

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