Montana Rides Again Short Guide

Montana Rides Again by Evan Evans (Frederick Faust/Max Brand)

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Characters

M ontana Rides Again, the second in a trilogy of novels about the Montana Kid, was composed, like the other two novels in the series, under the editorship of Cass Canfield at Harper's and published under the name of Evan Evans. As a result of the working relationship with Canfield, who wanted the Evan Evans novels to achieve a higher level of quality than the Max Brand westerns, Faust produced in this trilogy three of his finest works in the western genre. It is also clear that Montana Rides Again is one of those instances where a sequel is superior to its predecessor.

Montana Rides (1934), the first Montana Kid novel, is, to be sure, an exciting adventure story in its own right.

The first half tells the story of how two second-rate scoundrels recruit the Montana Kid to pose as the missing and long-lost son of Richard Lavery, one of the wealthiest ranchers in West Texas, and how the Kid brings off a successful imposture, winning the respect of Lavery's ranch hands and Lavery himself, and capturing the heart of Ruth Lavery, the rancher's daughter.

In the second half of the novel, the Kid, unable to take advantage of the Laverys' kindness and generosity, undertakes the impossible adventure of going down into the amoral world of Mexico and bringing back the real heir to the Lavery estate. The Kid must steal the boy, now a grown man, from Mateo Rubriz, the Mexican bandit who had originally kidnapped Lavery's son; since young Lavery has been raised as a Mexican, and as Rubriz's adopted son, the lad resists Montana's efforts all the way back to the border. Montana Rides establishes the character of the Montana Kid as a reckless adventurer who has been on his own since being orphaned at thirteen (as Faust himself had been), and the novel shows the Kid acquiring a conscience, through his decision to right the wrong to the Laverys. But the secondary characters, except for Ruth Lavery and her father, have not yet been developed to their real potential.

By contrast, Montana Rides Again enlarges the character of Rubriz to a "larger-than-life" figure as a worthy antagonist and, ultimately, as a friend of the Montana Kid, and introduces two other striking personalities — Rosita, the adventurous Mexican cantina dancer, and Brother Pascual, the simple giant Franciscan monk who is a steadfast and loyal assistant to Rubriz (and eventually the Kid). Moreover, Faust does a far better job of portraying the savage world of Mexico in the time of Porfico Diaz (1877-1911) here than in the earlier novel. Finally, the Kid is given an even greater challenge to adventure than in Montana Rides (1933).

The heroic qualities of the Montana Kid are also more thoroughly and effectively developed in the sequel than in Montana Rides. In the beginning of the story, he violates the wishes of his fiancee and her father by breaking a wild mare who is considered a dangerous mankiller. This action foreshadows his decision to answer a desperado's challenge and fight a duel on his wedding day, rather than ignoring the insult and staying for the ceremony; his action decisively rejects marriage and wealth as

one of the heirs to the Lavery estate. His acceptance of marriage to Ruth and a share in the family fortune — a typical happy ending for a Zane Grey western — would have meant the loss of his status as an "untamed" outsider. Moreover, the Kid's decision to fight a duel with Jack Lascar defies the warnings laid down by the sheriff of Bentonville, thereby making him an outlaw in the best Max Brand tradition. Thus the Montana Kid is a new incarnation of the original "untamed" Max Brand hero embodied in Dan Barry in Faust's first western and reincarnated in numerous figures of the 1930s westerns such as Speedy, Silvertip, and Sam Shannigan (in Gunman's Gold, serialized in 1933).

In addition, the Kid's attributes as a master of prowess and guile are sketched in more abundantly: He is revealed as a master trickster, not only able to play the role of a confidence man (as he did in Montana Rides), but fluent in Spanish and able to move freely in the world of Mexico, with its corrupt rulers and ruthless law officers or rurales. In his courtship of Rosita and in his relationship with Mateo Rubriz, the populist bandit, the Kid shows himself to be both calculating and masterful. In the Kid's exploits, he distinguishes himself by helping to recover an emerald crown belonging to the Church, and then in performing an impossible rescue of Rubriz. In the process, he wins the love of Rosita and the friendship of Rubriz, though the latter had predicted that he would kill the Kid after using him to aid in the recovery of the crown sacred to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The characterizations of Rubriz and Brother Pascual are excellent. Brother Pascual is a seemingly naive man of faith, a lovable giant, whose presence tends to bring out the better side of both Montana and Rubriz. As for Rubriz, the fierce and exuberant bandit chieftain is a triumph of character portrayal in the adventure novel.

Proud, quick tempered, boastful, arrogant, and then brave, generous, jolly, and forgiving by turns, Rubriz might well suggest the classic type of the miles gloriosus in Mexican guise — save that he is truly brave and resourceful, without a moment of cowardice. Equally appealing is the characterization of Rosita, a feminine and Mexican counterpart to the Montana Kid. Rosita is depicted as willing to reject the love of a wealthy general and provincial governor for a life of hardship and danger with Montana, and her pleasure in adventure and manipulating her male enemies is shown to be equal to Montana's love of guile. While Rosita does possess a sense of values rooted in love and loyalty, she is a fine creation in which Faust again managed to defy the conventional stereotypes of the heroine in this genre. Finally, it is a measure of Faust's success in these novels — although the same might be said about some earlier ones — that he describes his Mexican characters vividly and sympathetically, yet without patronizing them.

In regard to its themes, Montana Rides Again probably deserves to rank with some of the finest achievements in the fiction of romantic adventure, from King Solomon's Mines (Haggard, 1886) to The Thirty-Nine Steps (Buchanan, 1915). One major theme, the recovery of the holy crown of Our Lady of Guadalupe, is a chivalric quest with overtones of transcendence, worthy of a hero in Tolkien or of an Indiana Jones. The second theme concerns the rescue of Rubriz from his imprisonment in the Valley of the Dead — a plantation in Yucatan supported by convict labor, a place from which convicted criminals

never return. The rescue of Rubriz and his "resurrection" from the dead world of slavery occupies the second half of the novel, but it is linked with the recovery of the crown. Both themes are connected with a third and less obvious subtext, the defeat of arrogance — both arrogance of the corrupt general who has stolen the crown and the arrogance of Juan-Silva, the lord of the Valley of the Dead, who uses the lives of his laborers as stepping stones to a fantasy castle in Spain.

Finally, another major theme of the novel, and the trilogy, is the friendship between the Kid and Rubriz, the masculine bonding or comradeship they share in a world of adventure and freedom. In this regard, the novel resembles Singing Guns (1928-1929) and other Max Brand westerns; but an additional feature of the Montana Kid trilogy is the creation of a group or fellowship of adventurers around Montana who live in a perilous realm outside the routine of middle-class life and beyond the law, at least the law of nineteenth-century Mexico.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The story of a resourceful hero who goes to the "underworld" or land of the dead to rescue a comrade or lover is an archetypal theme of Greek mythology, and it also appears in Celtic mythology, of which Faust was an avid reader. Faust used the theme for his ambitious narrative poem, "Dionysus in Hades" (1931), as has been noted, and it is one of the central myths underlying many of his western stories in the 1930s, perhaps first being used consciously in Dunmore's exploit in King of the Range (serialized 1929).

This mythic theme also appears in the Red Hawk trilogy, about Rusty Sabin, a "white Indian," which appeared in 1934-1935, and it shows up in some of the Silvertip stories.

The theme of a hero who leaves the United States for adventure south of the border had been used by Faust in several 1920s westerns, including Seven Trails (serialized 1923), and The Border Bandit (serialized 1926). But in the earlier tales, the Mexican setting was depicted with less detail and authenticity.

Several earlier Max Brand heroes provide sketches for the Montana Kid, beginning of course with the archetypal figure of Dan Barry. Notably, Alfred Percy Lamb, or "the Lamb" of Rustlers of Beacon Creek (serialized 1929), and the Sleeper, the hero of Twenty Notches (serialized 1931) appear to be early portraits of the Kid, who is also adumbrated by some aspects of Silvertip. Jimmy Seton of The Return of the Rancher (serialized 1931) is an earlier hero who established an abiding friendship with a Mexican gunman, in a manner foreshadowing the relationship between Montana and Rubriz.

Finally, the creation of the Montana Kid may owe something to the romantic stories about Billy the Kid, the charming and reckless outlaw who, like Montana, set out on his own as a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boy. Billy had a peculiar appeal for Mexican-Americans in New Mexico, much as the Montana Kid seems to appeal to the Mexicans in Faust's novels. Faust would have been able to read a somewhat romantic version of Billy's life in The Saga of Billy the Kid by Walter Noble Burns (1926).

Adaptations

No film version of Montana Rides Again has been made, but the Montana Kid trilogy inspired a 1951 Paramount film, Branded, with Alan Ladd and Mona Freeman. This motion picture draws most of its plot from Montana Rides, and it suffers from an inhibited treatment of the material, as well as from obvious miscasting.

The stoical Ladd (a perfect Shane in George Stevens' 1953 film) is wholly inappropriate for the Montana Kid role, which demands a performance like that of the youthful Burt Lancaster in The Crimson Pirate (1952) or perhaps a Harrison Ford in his Indiana Jones persona. Mona Freeman makes a weak and tepid heroine, and the entire plot is overly complicated and much too sparing of the physical action. The film is also uneasy in its handling of the Mexican material. The picture is, in fact, the victim of a tame conception, which attempts to make the material more credible and realistic, as though it were derived from a Saturday Evening Post serial by Luke Short. What is required for a Max Brand western is a treatment more in the mode of Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) or even Silverado (1985).

Related Titles

Montana Rides Again had one sequel, The Song of the Whip (1936), an adventure novel nearly as entertaining. But the Kid and Rubriz are not given challenges as great as in the previous novel, so that the result is a sense of anticlimax.

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