Ninety-Two in the Shade Short Guide

Ninety-Two in the Shade by Thomas McGuane

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Characters

Objections raised against McGuane's rendering of female characters are less cogent when applied to Ninety-Two in the Shade. A woman can still suffer sexual objectification in this novel — Jeannie Carter, majorette become charge card addict, is referred to as "a simple pink cake with a slot" — but her role is accepted with a certain amount of awareness and choice on her part, and, taken as a fictive maneuver, this flatness of characterization is not nearly as pervasive here as in McGuane's earlier novels. Skelton's lover Miranda is especially noteworthy in this respect. In control of her own sexuality, unwilling to participate in the more egregious of Skelton's follies, and finally somewhat enigmatic in her independence, Miranda is the most fully developed female character in McGuane's first three novels. The coming to grips with that independence, on the part of a bewildered male, later forms the basis of Nobody's Angel (1981) and Something to be Desired (1984).

Social Concerns

Ninety-Two in the Shade presents its readers with an enervated, plasticized America — "Hotcakesland" is McGuane's term — that is the logical extension of Nicholas Payne's experience in The Bushwhacked Piano (1971; see separate entry). Its hero, Thomas Skelton, returns home to Key West to escape the emptiness of the continent, but finds there only the lunatic fringe of his culture, arrayed in cheap hype and frantic consumerism. It seems entirely appropriate here that Skelton makes his home in an abandoned fuselage, next door to a flophouse where an alcoholic drill sergeant leads the hotel winos in a retching close-order drill each day: When the values underpinning cultural forms are overturned or withdrawn, only the hollow shell of those forms remains, capable of retooling for other, more dubious purposes.

What figured in The Bushwhacked Piano as caustic satire is here present as a sadder, more jaded assumption — an American culture emptied of its meaning, a repository of dreams broken beyond repair.

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Themes

Given the total failure of the culture's promises toward sustenance and meaning, McGuane's novel turns instead to the question of the individual, and to the alternatives possible for that individual in the face of social forces bent on his invalidation. But Skelton's desire to become a sport fishing guide in the Keys — a decision made solely because it's what he is "good at" — garners immediate opposition from a rival guide, Nichol Dance. Dance plays an elaborate practical joke on Skelton, who retaliates by burning Dance's boat to the water; Dance then forbids Skelton to guide on pain of death, a promise he ultimately keeps. The point that finally emerges here is that the agon between Skelton and Dance revolves around the delicate question of necessity: While unjustifiable in terms of conventional morality, it moves forward with the inevitable tread of Greek tragedy.

The title of Ninety-Two in the Shade refers to the conditions existing at the time of Dance's first murder, of a schizoid "exercise boy" who terrorized Dance in his bar in Kentucky. By emphasizing the terrible neutrality of the universe with respect to human desires and decisions, McGuane makes it possible to justify Dance's killings as the necessities of a life where a man "sure had to hack his way through a lot of lunch meat." But at the same time McGuane problematizes the issue through Dance's own self-justification: his demands for what he calls "credence" deteriorate quickly into stagy tough talk. The attempt to escape the negations of Hotcakesland is fast subsumed by cornball mannerisms, the discourse of the B-grade Western.

Skelton, on the other hand, fares every bit as badly. Unable to synthesize the success of his huckster grandfather and the failure of his neurasthenic father with his own aimlessness, Skelton instead discourses on the metaphysics of the power drill, which, in its capacity to transfer the hole of the wall socket to uncounted holes wherever one wants them, stands as a fascinating and complex intermediary apparatus that engenders only more emptiness. In his rush to be a victim, Skelton seemingly forgets his own advice that "life looked straight in the eye was insupportable, as everyone knew by instinct." Although his willingness to play out the drama with Dance is offered as final answer to the "question of his conviction or courage," McGuane immediately ironizes all such questions, and the need for their asking, when he tells readers that "this was not theater; and Dance shot him through the heart anyway."

Adaptations

The film version of Ninety-Two in the Shade, released by United Artists in 1975, was scripted and directed by McGuane himself. Starring Peter Fonda, Margot Kidder, and Warren Oates, it was fairly well received by both reviewers and audiences, in part for its notable lack of Hollywood slickness and in part for the excellence of its acting, particularly by Oates in the role of Nichol Dance. It should remain of special interest to connoisseurs of the auteur theory, because it is an exceedingly rare instance of a novelist controlling both the script and visual realization of his work, and because McGuane made drastic alterations of the novel for the film version, shooting two alternative endings.

Ninety-Two in the Shade was the second McGuane work to appear on the screen: The Sporting Club became an Avco Embassy Pictures release in 1971, scripted by Lorenzo Semple, Jr., and directed by Larry Peerce. Opinion of the film is uniformly low.

McGuane has written several other screenplays. Rancho Deluxe (United Artists, 1975), starring Jeff Bridges, Elizabeth Ashley, and Slim Pickens, among others, premiered in the spring of 1975. Recurrently brutalized with the designation "offbeat," this modernized and campy anti-Western has a dedicated cult following, and is a good reflection of McGuane's penchant for startling incongruities and ethical inversions.

The Missouri Breaks (United Artists, 1976), starring Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson, and directed by Arthur Penn, followed next. Massively hyped and monumentally horrendous, this film would leave a bad taste in the mouths of all lovers of the Western lasting until Michael Cimino's Heaven's Gate proved that it was possible to do even worse. The script for The Missouri Breaks was published by Ballantine in conjunction with the movie, and, while somewhat disjointed, it shows that McGuane bears only minor responsibility: The more appalling portions of the film, particularly in its ending, were apparently a combination of the excesses of Brando and revisions made by script doctor Robert Towne at the behest of Jack Nicholson.

McGuane also wrote (with Bud Shrake) the script for Tom Horn (Warner Brothers, 1980), an uneven film which is notable as one of the final screen appearances of Steve McQueen.

His fourth and most recent Western screenplay, written in collaboration with novelist and friend Jim Harrison, is Cold Feet (Avenue Pictures, 1989), starring Keith Carradine and Sally Kirkland. McGuane's reputation as a screenwriter in this genre earned him an on-screen appearance in the American Cinema series documentary "The Western," where he proved to be a highly perceptive and knowledgeable critic.

Key Questions

The sharply etched characters in this novel, and its strikingly violent climax, will surely create intense responses on the part of readers. The task in discussion must be to expand upon that initial emotive reaction in ways that will do justice to the ethical and satiric dimensions of the novel. A comparison of the novel to the film McGuane made of it would be an excellent starting point.

1. Is McGuane's vision of an inherent violence in American society realistically accurate? Or does it mimic a pattern of ritualized violence more characteristic of movies than of the world?

2. How much does Skelton subscribe to Dance's principle of manhood based on "credence"? To the extent that he shares it, why are they still enemies, where does this connection between them break down?

3. How do women fare in this novel?

Does the contrast of Jeannie with Miranda form a reasonable take on society's constrictions of women, or are they both merely two sides of the same coin?

4. What exactly is "Hotcakesland"?

Does it exist, and have we continued to build it, since this novel's publication over two decades ago?

5. What alternative might be offered to fill the personal emptiness Skelton feels? Is he a romantic at heart, and how could he be one, given the piercing vision he directs at others?

6. What kind of lives do Skelton's forefathers offer as examples to be followed, or avoided?

7. Is the ultimate fate of Skelton a "tragic" one, as the Greeks would have understood that term?

Related Titles

McGuane's fictions exist on a continuum in relation to one another: as several commentators have pointed out, they frequently share common themes, and the main character of one novel often seems to be a permutation of his immediate predecessor. With his first novel, The Sporting Club (1969), one can see the beginning of McGuane's concern with the contest between men, and of his extreme and often outrageous treatment of sexuality. Panama (1978), his fourth novel, marks a departure in its use of first-person narration, but remains linked to the others in its autobiographical reference, a little explored but often mentioned constant in McGuane's work. Nobody's Angel is a leaner, more controlled narrative, less forced in its stylization and, in the opinion of many critics, more heartfelt.

Its portrait of Patrick Fitzpatrick's "sadness-for-no-reason" is a poignant variation on the afflictions of McGuane's earlier protagonists. Something to be Desired offers a tentative solution to the obsession with a woman that had plagued so many of his heroes.

Rather than leveling a charge of repetition, a more accurate view of McGuane's novels reveals a gradual but steady progression of subject and approach, changing both with the flavor of the times and the growth of their author.

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