Nothing But Blue Skies Short Guide

Nothing But Blue Skies by Thomas McGuane

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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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Characters

Unlike the protagonists of McGuane's earlier novels, Frank Copenhaver is already a successful businessman as the novel commences, and its trajectory lies in the story of Frank's disillusionment, overextension and failure, as opposed to the "upward" struggles of McGuane's other heroes.

While Frank diagnoses his own malaise as "a fatal inability to direct himself to the point," his acid-tongued commentary and wild bravado are far from lacking a point, as he serves as the lens for the kind of sharply focused social satire that McGuane readers have come to expect. At the same time, the realities of his life — his middle age, his personae as businessman, father, ex1960s hippie, fisherman and failed husband — give to Copenhaver a richness of wistfulness, regret and rueful contemplation, and a pervading, aching loneliness. At times, his self-regard holds largely a core of irony, as when he notes the absorption of himself and his friends into images of their parents and further reflects that such a realization "lacks tragic dimension almost as certainly as podiatry does." At other times, however, his musings are more revealing, as when he sees himself as caught in a new loneliness "which came not from solitude but from ambiguity about his everyday activities."

The key here is the notion of ambiguity, in that it is precisely the recognition of ambiguity, the sense that things may have a shifting and uncertain meaning, that is ultimately the undoing and salvation of Copenhaver.

As with any businessman, it is fit that Copenhaver be surrounded by acquaintances, if not friends, and of the males he notes that "it was good to have companions like these, large mammals," just before entering a barroom brawl. Still, most of the men here are largely indistinguishable "suits": Dick Hoiness, a rock-band refugee now hawking insurance; Jensen the philandering doctor, George Carnahan the banker, whom Frank calls a "spineless puke and pig-kissing swindler." Notable among them for definition and power is Boyd Jarrell, partly because, as a redneck cowboy who will not take orders, he defies Copenhaver; partly because, in his boiling menace, he resembles other violent men of the earth in McGuane's fictions like Nichol Dance or Billy Kelton. These characters seem to come up like a recurrent bad dream for McGuane, one unable to be exorcised, and if they are no longer murderous, they are nonetheless unresolved in his fiction. Two other men of note deserve mention. Frank's brother Mike, the fat and happy orthodontist, poses another kind of civilized violence, in his willingness to sell the family home without sentimental attachment, in his ability, unlike Frank, to remove their dying mother from life support. And Phil Page, Frank's fishing buddy and fellow deserted husband, articulates the despair felt by Frank when he says that "if we didn't have trout fishing, there'd be nothing you could really call pure in our lives at all."

But if the male characters in the novel sometimes lack definition, it is more than compensated for by the women here, as the old criticism of McGuane's flatness in the treatment of women characters has been completely exploded. Although some of them are still as randy as in McGuane's earlier novels, the sense is that they are more in

control than ever before, every bit the equals of and usually more powerful than Frank Copenhaver, both in the pain their departures produce in Frank and Phil Page, and in their engineering situations, as with Gracie, that Frank catches on to only much later. Notable among them is Frank's daughter Holly, who shares his love and skill in fishing, and who mimics her childhood success in reuniting her warring parents by pretending to drown by going through the elaborate pretense of romance with the right-wing "We, Montana" political lunatic Lane Lawlor. But even the minor characters, like the raucous and foul-mouthed Buick dealer June Cooper, or Frank's sometimes lover Lucy Dyer, are more than able to dish out as much as they take.

Of course, it is Frank's wife Gracie who demonstrates this independence of thought and capacity for benign manipulation the most, and although she exists largely out of our view, in the empty space of Frank's longing, her management of the situations is the most telling. It is the furthest extension of irony here that Grace had feigned, of all things, fishing, to buy the time to carry on the affair that broke their marriage, in that, while the purity and release found in the Sixteen River is damaged by her deception, she is still able to send Frank the message that, after all, she wants him back, and wanted him back even then. Although she says, as the novel ends, that "there's nothing crazier than picking up exactly where you left off," that is exactly where they do pick up.

Social Concerns/Themes

Perhaps nowhere else in McGuane's fiction is the melding of theme and social awareness more complete than in Nothing But Blue Skies. Persistent as background noise here is McGuane's usual searing critique of the tabloid mentality of American public discourse, and its reduction of complexities of human emotion and desire to formulae of money and disinformation.

But while he is as capable as ever of satirically barbed throwaways, as when he notes that "everyone in California seemed surrounded by quotation marks," McGuane's point of view on the vagaries and excesses of American social life comes not in this novel from a struggling and unregenerate outsider.

On the contrary, the novel's protagonist, Frank Copenhaver, is already a successful Montana businessman when the novel opens. A small-scale tycoon, deal maker and speculator, with interests ranging from real estate to cattle ranching to rental car franchises to whatever else comes to hand, Copenhaver has already bought into the ethos that earlier McGuane heroes like Nicholas Payne and Joe Starling had explicitly rejected. For Copenhaver, the question is not one of a refusal to enter the world of commerce; for he is already there. Instead, it is a matter of what to do when the assumptions underpinning that world begin to fall short, when one can no longer maintain the interest or energy necessary to sustain the illusion that one's ultimate self is constructed on the making of money.

Copenhaver's best option would seem to lie between the impotent rage of his daughter Holly's history professor, who is paralyzed by the spiraling stupidity of the American people, and his brother Mike's ethic of acceptance, which would dictate that instead of decrying the selling off of timber from the family's ancestral ranch, one should come to acknowledge that the time has probably come "for Americans to learn to love pavement with all their hearts."

For a while, Copenhaver clings to a Franklinesque principle of survival through sheer doggedness: "Press forward, he thought. Buy things, then sell them. Try to make a profit. Embed yourself in the robust flux, the brushfire of commerce." And there are diversions to be found in the spectator sport of observing the machinations of really big business — NASDAQ, Pepsi, the pharmaceutical megacorporations — as his own neglected business dissolves around him. But none of this allows him an escape from the sense that "if life seemed anything, it seemed thin. It had an 'as if quality." In a world where the last surviving silver wolf is tracked by radio collar through the wild, where Sony marketing determines not just purchases but personalities, it is not merely Frank Copenhaver's fate to conceive of the world as "flat," where our last tenuous moorings to the earth are ever in danger of being severed as we fall over the side to nowhere.

Nostalgia offers no solace here, regardless of its form. McGuane's rendering of Copenhaver's peeping in windows is in this regard doubly ironic, in that, while it offers Frank a tearful vision of the loving American family that he has lost, it also extends to

sexual fantasy and sheer brute voyeurism, replicating the current American belief that intrusion into private lives is an entitlement of the viewer, and thus mirroring the invasion of the personal that forms the basis of American media (and commercial) discourse. Nor is there remedy found in the collective, as the populist romance is given the lie in this novel, when two large gatherings of the populace here — one a pig show, the other a rally by rabid Montanan xenophobes chanting "Gut-shoot them at the border!" — are disrupted by Copenhaver. As the town looks on in curiosity and disgust, Copenhaver must ultimately face the realization that his decline is not merely a matter of his public "business," that he is in fact "dangerously overextended," a fine metaphor for a life stretched thin emotionally, always reaching for something just out of its grasp. Only when he can admit that he feels "like a cooling asteroid in an ocean of darkness," when he can acknowledge himself as something other than a success, can reconciliation take place. His moment of "grace," his reuniting with his wife Gracie, stems precisely from her satisfaction that his love for her has "almost ruined" Copenhaver, and that this was what had to happen: The withdrawal of the religion of commerce clears a space for the rebirth of love and belonging, of home. Thus, the movement of the novel can be read as a general process of divestiture, a casting away of things, of desires masquerading as needs, to get to the place where one is indeed left with "nothing but blue skies."

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Although we might place Nothing But Blue Skies in a tradition of the American novel as critique of the business ethic ranging from Henry James's The Ambassadors (1904) to The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit, its most pertinent precedents are McGuane's earlier novels themselves. The antagonism between father and son characterizing his early works appears here, but as a historical fact, absorbed by the more imminent breakup of a marriage. If this reflects a maturity in theme, it also signals a movement toward closure and resolution in structure that the earliest of McGuane's novels tended to evade.

It is still the case that we find here a narrative composed of a succession of riotous incidents, a headlong careening toward a dreaded future — Copenhaver scraping Boyd off the back of his pickup by driving it through the carwash, spearing Darryl's truck with a forklift, hiding in a garbage can to catch a malicious bike-riding pre-teen.

But the violence inherent here is seemingly random and undirected, a mixture of lashing out with a desire to escape that comically deflects the blow.

Similarly, when the plot accelerates toward its ending, and Frank whirls out of control, moving from a confrontation with cowboys in the drunk tank, to one with preservationists at his Kid Royale Hotel and chicken farm, to one with his wife's lover Edward, coherence is ultimately achieved through the agency of Frank's wife, Gracie.

At some 350 pages, this novel is twice as long as most of McGuane's earlier fictions, and while the tautness of the style has not lessened, the danger of structural looseness in an extended plot of such explosive comic energy is no doubt a real one. This danger, however, is obviated by the structural device of beginning and ending at the same point. Gracie's departure, and the already broken marriage that occasions it, is the precondition of this novel, stark in its lack of hyperbole. Gracie's second departure, this time with Frank beside her, ends the novel, and with it comes an understanding of the genesis of their separation which ultimately gives rise to reconciliation. In describing this narrative circle, and thus in effect ending before the beginning, Copenhaver finds, at least provisionally, an exit from despair, and McGuane finds a structuring device which permits a sense of closure, thus distinguishing the comic from the chaotic.

Key Questions

Nothing But Blue Skies differs from other McGuane novels in the contours of its main character and in the direction of its relations between men and women. A comparative reading of this novel and an earlier McGuane text like The Bushwhacked Piano (1971) would thus be a real advantage, in setting the differences more clearly in relief. In lieu of this, it would perhaps be revealing to consider the possibilities of where McGuane's point of view differs from Frank Copenhaver's, and where they converge.

1. Do the lyrics of the song "Blue Skies," perhaps familiar from the Willie Nelson version, shed light on the story of Frank Copenhaver?

2. Which of Copenhaver's criticisms of American business seem the most pertinent? (The conversion of the slogan "It's a Sony" to "Be Sony" is one that sets him off.) Is he as much a cause of this kind of thing as he is a sufferer of it?

3. Is Lucy Dyer a convincing treatment of a female character, given the overt sex in the novel? Why does she send Frank on a trip to the Arctic, and why does he go? How much of Copenhaver's attitude toward women is endorsed by McGuane? Is McGuane's treatment of women's sexuality offensive?

4. There are frequent references throughout Nothing But Blue Skies to the 1960s as an enabling and defining force. Is this background, or is it an important subtext? Do people of Copenhaver's generation continue to define themselves against that decade, and should they?

5. Does the novel offer a compelling critique of the extremes of conservative political movements? Or is the "We, Montana" group used more for comic than satiric effect?

6. How is setting the novel in Montana significant, aside from it being the author's adopted place of residence?

Could it be transplanted to, say, Florida?

7. Boyd Jarrell apparently beats his wife, yet when Copenhaver sees her she lashes out at him with vehemence.

How can this be explained?

8. Is McGuane's picture of modern life in the American suburbs an accurate one? Where does it strike home, and where does it miss its mark?

9. Given that McGuane has written several film scripts and directed one himself, how could Nothing But Blue Skies be adapted for the screen? What would be lost in such a version?

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