Quinn's Book Short Guide

Quinn's Book by William Kennedy

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Kennedy says that in Quinn's Book he returns to Albany's past to discover patterns that anticipate the twentieth cen tury. In establishing his characters, the Daughertys, the Quinns, and Katrina's ancestors, Kennedy presents a cross section of Albany society.

For example, Hillegond Roseboom is the daughter of a tavern keeper "of bibulous repute"; she marries the wealthy Petrus Staats whose ancestors first settled in Fort Orange—later renamed Albany—in 1638 and who, through hard work and business acumen, become one of Albany's socially prominent, oldmoney families. Although Hillegond marries primarily for money, she is not haughty, but rather affable, industrious, and one of Kennedy's hearth goddesses.

She warmly welcomes Quinn and Maud into her mansion on the wintery night of the opening cataclysms; she opens her mansion to the Ryan family the night Toddy Ryan is killed and to fugitive slaves whom she helps to freedom on the Underground Railroad. While her murder is part of the novel's suspense and a tragedy that Quinn must transcend, her manor house symbolizes new beginnings, a fact evident in the novel's denouement when Quinn and Maud renew their love for each other in Hillegond's stately house.

Born in London and educated at Oxford as a "merchant-scientist," Lyman Fitzgibbon arrives in America and marries Emily Taylor, whose family amassed a fortune in shipping. Lyman also becomes Petrus Staats's partner in the nail workscum-ironworks-cum-stove-making foundry. By investing in insurance, banks, railroads, and land, Lyman Fitzgibbon becomes one of Albany's richest and most respected citizens, and thus becomes a model of the landed gentry and the self-made American.

John the Brawn McGee typifies the struggle of the Irish immigrant to succeed in America. After losing his canal boat, he becomes a "river rat" transporting legal goods and contraband on the Hudson River. McGee becomes young Daniel Quinn's employer and master. As one who seizes any opportunity, McGee, accompanied by Quinn, rows out onto the ice-clogged Hudson, not to rescue Magdalena Colon and Maud Fallon, but to save Magdalena's trunk and its contents. He seizes other opportunities, as well: In a humorously bawdy scene, he makes love to Magdalena's corpse and thereby resurrects her; he appoints himself as her bodyguard; and to cut down expenses, he puts the sleeping Daniel Quinn off the boat. When he knocks down Michael Hennessey, a world champion boxer, McGee launches a boxing career that eventually makes him a world champion. He becomes the owner of the Blue Heaven bar in Albany's lumber district; with his fists and brickbats he polices voting precincts and ballot boxes for the Democrats; he owns sixteen gambling houses, all sanctioned by grateful Democrats; and he also becomes a principal stockholder in Saratoga Springs' new race track.

Similar to McGee, Magdalena Colon (her stage name is La Ultima) is motivated by a desire to get on in life, and she does anything to secure fame and fortune: using Hispanicized English, crossing the ice-clogged Hudson River as a publicity stunt, and

even returning to the stage after her "resurrection" to perform her famous and lascivious Spider Dance.

Magdalena eventually marries the lecherous but wealthy Obadiah Griswold, a carriage and sleigh manufacturer and equal partner with McGee in Saratoga's new race track. Attesting to her fame and social position are the "great droves" of socially mixed people attending her "proximate death" celebration. According to Quinn, however, Magdalena's greatest accomplishments are her abilities to survive "as a solitary woman in a hostile world" and to nurture the "incredible Maud."

Although Joshua's characterization typifies the slavery issue, it also becomes part of the novel's "inch-pace" progress.

When he escapes to New York's Five Points neighborhood, he aligns himself with an underworld gang, a precursor to the black gangsters in Harlem in the 1920s. Joshua becomes friends with John the Brawn McGee, first as a sparring partner and then as dealer in McGee's gambling emporiums where, as part of his legacy of revenge, Joshua becomes a "nimble-fingered fleecer" of white men.

Joshua's death at the hands of the white mob during the draft riots underscores the novel's theme of violence, and his and his father's fates become poignant reminders of the cost of progress, which paves the way for a black woman "with a fistful of money" to bet at Saratoga Springs' race course.

The Plum family comprise a lower social level. Generally, the Plums are a bad lot—Kennedy often puns on their family name—and Ezra, the first known American Plum, appears in 1759, becomes the city's official "whipper," then the official hangman, and is eventually murdered by his own grandson, Jeremiah.

The Plum family history includes horse stealing, incest, and murder. Eli "Peaches" Plum's characterization underscores the Civil War's injustices when, as a bounty jumper, Peaches joins the Union Army eighteen different times at $50 an enlistment. The last time Peaches returns home to give his father the enlistment bonus, his father tells him to rejoin and not come home because Peaches is going to war in place of his lawyer brother, "a son the father couldn't do without, the way he could do without Peaches." During his first battle, Peaches is so scared that he bolts, is caught, tried, and executed as a warning to others. Along with the Forty-Fourth Regiment, Quinn witnesses Peaches's execution in another rite of passage.

To complement the novel's inch-pace progress and to develop the love story at the heart of the novel, Kennedy uses the bildungsroman motif in relating the lives, times, and experiences of the central protagonists, Daniel Quinn and Maud Lucin da Fallon. After the death of his parents and sister during the 1849 cholera epidemic, fifteen-year-old Quinn sallies forth into life, first working for the tyrannical Masterson on his canal boat, and then running away to work for John the Brawn McGee. Quinn undergoes his next rite of passage when he rescues Maud from the ice-clogged Hudson and pledges to kidnap her one day, the beginning of the love story. Quinn also wants to succeed in life,

and under Will Canaday's tutelage, Quinn reads voraciously, especially the Albany Chronicle, the newspaper Canaday founded. Quinn's experiences continue when he becomes a newspaper reporter and reports those events that symbolize the nation's destiny: the treatment of the slaves and the Irish, the 1863 New York Draft Riots, and the Civil War.

Maud Fallon is precocious: At two years of age she recites the Ave Maria in Latin, and at four she begins a diary and fills four notebooks with poetic language.

When Maud's father is forced off his land in Ireland, he joins the farmers' rebellion, is arrested, but escapes to Canada. Maud's mother then sends her to live with Magdalena Colon, her aunt. Although Maud's initiation begins when she travels to the United States with Magdalena, her other significant experiences occur when she becomes a "sojourning spiritualist," when she becomes a "daring daneuse," and especially when, to quote Quinn, she performs her Mazeppa act during which Maud "barebacked, perhaps also bare buttocked and bare busted . . . climbed those Albany platforms to scandalously glamorous international heights." Moreover, as Maud's foster-mother, Magdalena also teaches Maud how to survive as a woman in a hostile world.

Quinn's and Maud's love story weaves its way through the narrative and is resolved in the closing pages. In the traditional hero-meets-heroine formula, various forces always separate the lovers.

John the Brawn McGee willfully puts the sleeping Quinn ashore, and when Quinn finds Maud again in Saratoga, Maud stages her own mysterious disappearance so she can help Magdalena. In 1858, when Maud says she is interested in making money, Quinn petulantly spurns her.

Then the Civil War intervenes, and Maud dreams that Quinn, who is a war correspondent, has been killed by a cannonball. Quinn has, in fact, been struck by a spent cannonball that broke his leg. Six years later, the two are reunited, and Quinn kidnaps Maud as he so long ago promised.

While the plot summary suggests high melodrama, the love story is grounded in reality. In the initial stages of their love, Quinn is youthfully romantic and often fantasizes about kidnapping Maud. Being more practical than he, Maud knows they are too young. When they are reunited in Saratoga Springs—itself a symbol of new beginnings and new lives—they are mature and ready "at last for love."

Just as Magdalena is Maud's foster mother, two characters become Quinn's foster fathers. Will Canaday fosters Quinn's career as a newspaper and war correspondent. Emmett Daugherty lives down the road from Quinn's family, and when Quinn's family perishes during the cholera plague, he takes the young Quinn into his house and eventually secures him a job on Masterson's canal boat. Emmett is another Irishman who, through hard work, becomes successful. As Lyman Fitzgibbon's driver on the trip to purchase land for the new railroad, Emmett saves Lyman and his lawyer when local

mountain men threaten to tar and feather both of them. In addition, Emmett rises quickly in Lyman's ironworks from apprentice to chief grievance spokesman.

Social Concerns

O, Albany! (1983)—a collection of Injournalistic essays about Albany, New York—William Kennedy writes that the city is a microcosm that reflects the American and human continuum. Beginning in 1849 and ending in 1864—a greater time frame than his other novels— Quinn's Book focuses on those cataclysmic events that shaped the destinies of its characters—the Civil War, the plight of the famine Irish, the cholera plague, slavery, and the New York draft riots.

Indeed, these events are symbolized in the novel's opening disasters: an exploding iceberg on the Hudson River and the subsequent flood and fire it caused.

One of the social concerns in Quinn's Book is to relate the turbulent effects of the Civil War on the United States, Albany, and the characters' lives. Albany's Forty-Fourth Regiment marches off to fight and die in battles. Protagonist Daniel Quinn resolutely rushes off as a war correspondent for Horace Greeley's Tribune when Maud Fallon jilts him and breaks his heart. As part of the novel's bildungsroman theme, the Civil War becomes a rite of passage for Quinn, and when he returns from the war's "mudholes of Hell," he knows the horrors of battle and emphasizes these when he speaks at Albany's summer bazaar.

Quinn's Book is also about the effects of slavery on the country's social and moral fabric. The cruelties and injustices of slavery are epitomized by Joshua's family history. Cinque, Joshua's father, was captured in Sierre Leone, led a successful shipboard revolt, was betrayed by a white sailor, and then sold into slavery when the ship arrived in Virginia. When Cinque tries to escape again, he is hanged by his feet and whipped to death in front of three-year-old Joshua. Joshua inherits a legacy of revenge, escapes to New York, and then aids over four hundred slaves to escape on the Underground Railroad.

Joshua is killed by a white mob during the New York Draft Riots of 1863, another cataclysmic event spawned by the Civil War.

Another social concern in Quinn's Book is the plight of the famine Irish who were turned off their lands, suffered abject poverty, and then immigrated to the United States. Once in America, they are treated inhumanely. Because of their large numbers and because they are thought to be carriers of cholera, the police and posses turn them away from Albany and herd them into filthy encampments on Albany's outskirts, where they are loaded onto freight cars for the West. Those fortunate enough to settle in Albany either live along creek banks and are called the Creeks or live along the hills and are called the Hills. The major conflict between these two factions occurs when Alfie Palmer, a Hill Irishman who has been laid off at the iron works, kills Toddy Ryan, a Creek Irishman who still works at the iron works. The battle between the Ryans and Palmers, or between the Hills and Creeks, is bloody; but while some combatants are shot or stabbed, most are severely beaten with clubs, pipes, bricks, and fists. Lyman Fitzgibbon

chastises those who work at his foundry, agrees to pay Alfie Palmer's medical bills and to support Ryan's widow and children. Peace reigns, and the stove-making resumes.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The bildungsroman technique develops the love story about Daniel Quinn and Maud Fallon. In tracing the characters' rites of passage from adolescence to maturity,Quinn's Book opens when Quinn is fourteen and Maud is about twelve; when the plot ends, Quinn is twenty-nine and Maud is about twenty-six. In between, Maud's rites of passage emphasize various aspects of the show business world in the 1840s and 1860s. As a journalist, Quinn's rites of passage center on historical events. Quinn's Book belongs to those American novels dealing with the rites of passage of its young characters, a literary tradition that goes back to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1885; see separate entry) and Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925; see separate entry) and forward to J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye (1951; see separate entry) Winston Groom's Forrest Gump (1986), and John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany (1989; see separate entry) As a story about life in Albany, New York, Quinn's Book also belongs to the city novel tradition that includes Stephen Crane's Maggie, A Girl of the Streets(\ 893; see separate entry), Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900), Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt (1922; see separate entry) and John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces (1980; see separate entry), Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet(1970), and John Updike's four novels about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom: Rabbit, Run (1960); Rabbit Redux (1971; see separate entry); Rabbit Is Rich (1981; see separate entry); and Rabbit at Rest. Unlike Crane's Maggie and Dreiser's Carrie Meeber who are defeated by city life and its forces, Kennedy's characters—like those of Toole, Bellow, and Updike—find meaning and purpose within city life.

Themes

As in Kennedy's other novels, a major theme in Quinn'sBook is regeneration. Just as Albany transcends the destructive ice, flood, and fire that open the novel, so does the United States transcend the effects of the Civil War. That the country is slowly regenerating is evident as Daniel Quinn sits on the veranda of Saratoga Springs' United States Hotel and reads in the Tribune about a Confederate officer who says the battle of Vicksburg "has proven fatal to our cause." The officer's comment foretells the end of the Civil War and the eventual healing of the country's wounds. In fact, the nation's regenerative process is symbolized in the carriage procession that contains an "American motley"— farmers, soldiers, bankers, writers, politicians, lawyers, actors, and widows—all moving at "inch-pace progress" toward the new race course.

As Daniel Quinn and Emmett Daugherty watch the famine Irish boarding freight cars for the West, Daugherty says, "They're lost, most of them . . . But if lost it is, then some say this is the land to be lost in, for it all comes right again here." Not only does Daugherty's comment apply to the famine Irish, but it pertains to the country, the slaves' plights, and the love affair between Daniel and Maud. Some of the Irish become Albany's leading politicians and prominent citizens, some become entertainers and writers, and most establish Albany's Irish neighborhoods like North Albany, Gander Bay, and the Colonie. That the slaves' lives will also become better is evident in references to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, in Joshua's successes in McGee's gambling parlors, and in the affluent black woman at the new race track. Finally, all will become right again for Quinn and Maud, who are reconciled at the novel's close.

Key Questions

Rich as it is in social history, Quinn's Book offers ample opportunity for fruitful discussion. In it, Kennedy ties together significant social events to show their interactions. Hence, the Irish migration, slavery, and the Civil War are pulled together into an interpretation of history.

Kennedy's primary linking technique is characterization: Characters participate in multiple events, mixing the Irish Americans with the escaped slaves and placing both in the context of the Civil War.

Thus a discussion that focuses on the lives of individual characters is likely to blossom into a discussion of America's social history, perhaps even into a discussion of how we of today view the lives of the Americans of the min-nineteenth century.

1. What other novels use the Civil War as part of a bildungsroman theme, a story of a character's growth and education? How does Quinn's Book compare to them?

2. What is the significance of Emmett Daugherty's remark, "But if lost it is, then some say this is the land to be lost in, for it all comes right again here"? What does the remark reveal about Daugherty? Does it convey an idea common to the Irish characters?

3. Is the reconciliation between Quinn and Maud credible? How does it affect the themes of the novel?

4. What aspects of American society are depicted in Quinn's Book? Which characters are associated with each aspect?

5. How does the murder of Hillegond affect the lives of other characters? Why was she murdered? Does her murder affect the novel's themes?

6. What does Lyman Fitzgibbon symbolize? Is his life an example of the American Dream? How realistic is his life?

7. Various characters make their ways to success in America. What are the different routes to success? Are some routes better than others? By showing these different routes, what is Kennedy saying about America?

8. In the lives of characters such as the Plums and Joshua, does Kennedy show how some of America's modern problems were started?

9. How does Magdalena Colon affect the life and personality of Maud Fallon?

Would Maud have been a different person had she not known Magdalena? What traits in Magdalena may have helped Maud survive?

10. Who is the more mature person, Maud or Quinn?

11. Kennedy's novels tend to be connected by characters, families, and historical events. Why would he do this?

12. How does Kennedy hold ones interest in the slow-paced Quinn's Book?

Related Titles

Kennedy calls his novels "cycles" to emphasize their open-endedness, and the interconnections between setting, characters, incidents, and themes. First the time frame connects Quinn's Book with the other cycle novels. While The Ink Truck (1969) is set in the 1960s and Legs (1975; see separate entry), Billy Phelan's Greatest Game(1978), and Ironweed (1983; see separate entry) are set in the 1920s and 1930s, Quinn's Book is set in the mid 1800s, and thus helps to set the stage for the later novels. In addition,Quinn's Book connects with the other novels through historical incidents: Albany's great fire of August 17, 1848; the Civil War; the 1863 draft riots; the cholera epidemics; and the Hudson River's periodic flooding of Broadway. Bailey's reveries in The Ink Truck take him to Albany's past and the cholera epidemic; in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, Jake Berman says his grandfather had been thrown out a window during the draft riots in New York; both Billy and Francis Phelan recall 1913 when the Hudson River flooded Broadway; and John the Brawn McGee's and Joshua's underworld connections with the Five Points gangs foreshadow the Roaring Twenties and Legs Diamond and Dutch Schultz. The black gangsters, Legs Diamond, and Dutch Schultz are secondary focuses in The Cotton Club (1983), the screenplay that Kennedy co-authored with Frances Ford Coppola.

Quinn's Book also relates to the other novels through characters. For example, Daniel Quinn is the ancestor of George Quinn, the husband of Margaret Elizabeth Phelan Quinn and the father of Daniel Quinn, in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game and Ironweed. In addition, Emmett Daugherty is the forebear of Edward and Martin Daugherty who appear in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game and Ironweed. Daniel Quinn is a reporter for the Albany Chronicle, a newspaper that precurses the Albany Times-Union in The Ink Truck, Legs, Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, and Ironweed.

Finally, through theme, Quinn's Book relates to Kennedy's preceding novels about characters who fall only to rise, such as Bailey's numerous setbacks in The Ink Truck, Billy Phelan's fall from McCall grace in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, and Francis Phelan's twenty-two years of vagrancy. So, too, in Quinn's Book, Daniel Quinn, Maud Fallon, Magdalena Colon, and John the Brawn McGee must all suffer reversals before they become successful and happy. At the same time, within the novel's larger construct, the United States must transcend the chaos of a civil war before it can progress and prosper.

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