

Semi-Tough Short Guide

Semi-Tough by Dan Jenkins

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Characters

The narrator-hero of *Semi-Tough* is Billy Clyde Puckett, star half-back for the New York Giants and unregenerate Texan. He and his teammates are preparing for the Super Bowl, and he has been commissioned to keep a journal for publication. It is a mark of Billy Clyde's intelligence that he sees the comedy of preserving the innermost thoughts of a football player for posterity even as he does it. Billy Clyde is profane, street smart, hard living, intelligent though hardly an intellectual, and possessed of a nature that is surpassingly sweet. His best friends are Marvin "Shake" Tiller, his teammate and childhood buddy, and Barbara Jane Bookman, every man's fantasy — gorgeous, rich, smart-mouthed, one of the boys. These three are one another's family; they live together, defend one another, love one another. In addition, there are Billy Clyde's teammates, his casual friends of both sexes, his opponents, Barbara Jane's parents, Big Ed and Big Barb Bookman — a grand collection of eccentric, larger-than-life characters derived from traditional satire or comedy.

Although there are hints that both Shake Tiller and Barbara Jane Bookman have hidden depths (Shake, for example, is clearly a closet intellectual and the only one troubled by the violence of the game that employs him and by the curious relationship the three share), Billy Clyde is the only character readers come to know completely. No deep thinker, he relies on instinct and triumphs. He is, in a very real sense, a figure of wish-fulfillment and fantasy; in his athletic prowess, his success with women, his talent for friendship, his careless lifestyle based on immediate self-gratification, he is what almost every Southwesterner has wished to be, in more frivolous moments.

The characters who inhabit *SemiTough* are from the comic tradition; rather than psychological depth and complexity, they offer the reader a series of social and moral positions personified. In Billy Clyde Puckett, for example, readers have a spokesman for good — in professional sports, in social intercourse, and in love.

Social Concerns

The central social concern in all of Jenkins's writing is the place and function of sports in American culture.

Semi-Tough is concerned with professional football and the craziness that surrounds and defines it. The world of professional football is casually racist, profligate of humans and money. Jenkins, loving the sport, is not in the least reverent about its place in culture, and he has an insider's knowledge of the excesses that haunt it. As social satire, *Semi-Tough*, comically exposes human vice and folly and the "sins" of a small segment of society — the closed world of football players, their women, families, owners, and hangerson.

Additionally, the novel depicts certain social values identifiable as uniquely Texan. *Semi-Tough* celebrates Texan brashness, boastfulness, hardheadedness; it also displays Jenkins's pleasure in the idiom of Texas — profane, inventive, comic.

Techniques

Semi-Tough is written in the form of a journal or diary that Billy Clyde has been commissioned to keep as a record of the team's preparation for the Super Bowl. In fact, it is a highly personal, impressionistic book of days interspersed with memories of Billy Clyde's past. The tension between what the journal is supposed to accomplish and what it actually does is a comment upon the sports world that Billy Clyde inhabits. His preparation for the big game consists of nonstop parties, lots of sex and laughs, and sheer good times.

There is not a tightly-structured plot; the novel is episodic, anecdotal. There are two central actions which function as unifying elements: the Super Bowl game and the ultimate declaration of love between Billy Clyde and Barbara Jane Bookman. The novel, in the tradition of comedy, ends with the promise of a marriage.

Themes

Jenkins develops the idea of an unadulterated, although not naive, joy in sports values. These values are largely male-oriented in *Semi-Tough*, but they are also human values: the pleasure of competition, fair play, and team loyalty. Buried underneath the locker room horseplay, there is a complex fabric of affection and unspoken male bonding that makes race differences, the cynicism that arises from being treated as an object, and wild disparities in intelligence and skill peripheral.

In the very best sense, Jenkins's novel celebrates boys' values; his narrator ends almost every chapter with some ritualized taunt aimed at the opposing team: "Death to the dog-ass Jets." A man playing a boy's game triumphs by exhibiting a boy's strengths: enthusiasm; a simple, unquestioned loyalty to teammates and friends; a love for the game that transcends the dross that threatens to overcome it; boundless, undirected energy; and an inexhaustible capacity for good-spirited naughtiness.

Adaptations

Semi-Tough was made into a very successful film starring Burt Reynolds as Billy Clyde, Kris Kristofferson as Shake Tiller, and Jill Clayburgh as Barbara Jane Bookman. It was released in 1977 to generally favorable reviews.

The only reservation that critics expressed was that the film was less an adaptation of the novel and more a vehicle for Burt Reynolds's brand of arch comedy. There was a television situation comedy adaptation of SemiTough that did not last a full season.

Literary Precedents

Semi-Tough, a comic sports novel, rests upon both of those traditions.

Ring Lardner is an obvious influence.

The novel is also a good example of regional fiction; much of the humor of language and characterization is specifically Texan. The pleasure exhibited in the eccentric and flamboyant behavior of the characters has its roots in the Southwestern folklore of the cowboy/ wildcatter/good old boy/outlaw hero.

In addition, the novel depends heavily on the tradition of wish fulfillment that is characteristic of romance; Billy Clyde is a fantasy figure of wish-fulfillment; in a less noble way, Barbara Jane Bookman is also. In the Giants' triumph over the Jets in the Super Bowl, one confronts the fantasy of the sports fan: his team, long a loser, wins it all. Jenkins's novel, written in 1972 in the spirit of wish fulfillment, provides the contemporary reader with one of the few examples of romance and reality meeting and becoming one.

Related Titles

In 1984, Jenkins published *Life Its Ownself*, whose subtitle is *The SemiTougher Adventures of Billy Clyde Puckett & Them*. It continues the story of "them," telling of Billy Clyde's career change, from football hero to color commentator, and of the troubles of Billy Clyde and Barbara Jane's marriage which are, according to Barbara Jane, "nothing that a faith healer can't fix."

The hero of Jenkins's 1974 novel, *Dead Solid Perfect*, is professional golfer, Kenny Puckett, Billy Clyde's uncle and role model. In all three novels, frequent reference is made to Herb's Cafe, a bar in Fort Worth that is Billy Clyde's emotional home. Herb's Cafe is the setting of the 1981 novel, *Baja Oklahoma*.



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