Stallion Gate Short Guide

Stallion Gate by Martin Cruz Smith

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Contents

Characters

Sgt. Joe Pena is the central character; indeed, he is the novel's only center.

He connects episodes of science and romance, jazz and boxing, mysticism and technology, humor and melodrama; he connects the fiction and the history. As such, he is, as reviewers noted, overburdened. He is too excellent: He was an eighth-ranked heavyweight; he played piano with the jazz greats; he was in the Philippines with MacArthur, and escaped. On July 15, 1945, he outboxes an opponent, uses $50,000 to buy a jazz club, ensures that Ben and Roberto escape to Mexico, and then, as the scientists count down to the first explosion of an atomic bomb at 5:30 am on July 16, Joe wrestles with and kills his nemesis, Capt. Augustino, atop the tower at Trinity. And yet, despite the serendipity of his encounters, Joe emerges as a credible character, capable of carrying the thematic burden which Smith has placed upon him.

The remaining characters are defined in vignettes. Although they, too, are burdened with thematic significance — Scientists, Indians, and Soldiers — they emerge as engaging persons. Characters such as Oppenheimer, General Groves, and Klaus Fuchs seem to accord with their historical counterparts.

(The same may be said of the quasi-historical Capt. Augustino.) And the Native American characters seem to be authentic in their beliefs and behaviors.

Social Concerns/Themes

Although the narrative of Stallion Gate can be admired for its technique — for the clarity with which Smith develops a number of intersecting plot lines and the ingenuity with which he blends the actions of his fictional and historical characters — the novel's high ambitions are most evident in its treatment of its principal theme: the conflict between two visions of man's place in the world, that of the European scientific mind and that of the Native American mind, a conflict set at a crucial time, 1943 to 1945 and in a crucial place, Los Alamos and Trinity ("Stallion Gate" is a local name for the spot which J. Robert Oppenheimer renamed "Trinity" when he selected it as the site of the first test of a nuclear device.)

The first vision is that of such well-known scientists as Oppenheimer, Edward Teller, Enrico Fermi, and others; the second is that of the Pueblo Indians. Both visions are creative, but the scientists use their speculations and their technology to split the atom and produce a fission bomb; the Indians, inheriting a radically different worldview, use a quite different technology — dreams, dances, magic wands, pottery — for quite different ends. A secondary conflict emerges within the European-American community, as the visionary scientists find themselves increasingly at odds with the security-minded military authorities who sponsor the project.

The novel's protagonist, Sgt. Joe Pena, finds himself at the center of these conflicts. He is a Pueblo Indian who has been partially, but not entirely, alienated from his family and his people by his cosmopolitan experiences as a professional boxer and jazz musician and by his service as a soldier. Joe finds himself in sympathy with both the scientists and the Indians. As Oppenheimer's driver/bodyguard (selected in part because he had known Oppenheimer as a boy in New Mexico), he develops a personal relationship with Oppy (and in a subplot, he falls in love with a refugee mathematician, Anna Weiss). Joe becomes involved in the process of inventing the bomb — selecting the Trinity site, transporting radioactive materials, even climbing the tower at Trinity to free the prototype as it is raised to its final position. But Joe also rediscovers his inalienable links to his Indian heritage — to the home of his dead mother, to the ceremonial dancing and clowning of his people. He responds to the New Mexican landscape itself — the deserts and mesas, the villages and ruins.

Joe's ambivalent position is epitomized in his relations with his uncle, Ben, and Ben's blind companion, Roberto. At one point the blind Roberto holds the scientist (and traitor) Klaus Fuchs captive at gunpoint. As a security officer, Joe's duty requires him to apprehend the pair; as an Indian and a man, he must prevent their apprehension. Inspired by images of the destructiveness that will be unleashed at Trinity, Ben and Roberto wander through the novel's action, warning Joe that the project must be stopped. They use the "lightning wands" to invoke conflagrations that will disrupt the experimentation. Although he will not betray Oppenheimer and bomb, Joe also refuses to betray Ben and Roberto, finally arranging for them to escape to Mexico.

The second challenge to Joe's loyalty to Oppenheimer comes from Captain Augustino, the head of security (a character based upon the actual Captain Peer de Silva). Augustino assumes that the Europeans who work under his protection at Los Alamos are Communist subversives, and his suspicions focus upon Anna Weiss and upon Oppenheimer himself (ironically, he dismisses Joe's evidence that Fuchs is the actual traitor). Joe thus finds himself caught between the political paranoia of military security and the apolitical innocence of the scientists.

Techniques

The mixing of historical and fictional characters and historical and fictional events has enjoyed a recent vogue in American fiction. It is one well-suited to Smith's style: His novels have always displayed a thorough knowledge of more or less esoteric matters — Gypsy lore, bats and Indians, life in Moscow. Stallion Gate applies this research method to recreating a historical context. Selecting a crucial moment in history, Smith has crafted an intelligent novel which becomes neither a sophomoric melodrama nor a thinly fictionalized lecture on bomb-makers and bomb-making (nor a simplistic sermon on evil scientists and good Indians).

There is, instead, enough drama (enough character, setting, and plot) and enough lecture. The thematic conflicts, while not subtle, emerge concretely and organically within the drama.

The structure of the narrative also merits comment. Simple chronology governs the overall shape. The action begins in November 1943, when Capt.

Augustino recruits Joe, and ends on the morning of July 16, 1945, when Joe kills Augustino and the bomb explodes. But within this linear development, Smith plays his different themes artfully. The novel pauses several times to describe the techniques of different arts — the art of jazz, the art of boxing, the art of pottery, the art of dance, the art of constructing atomic bombs. The art of Stallion Gate is perhaps most like that of jazz, with Smith skillfully introducing and recalling his themes. Although flawed by the excellence of the hero and the neatness of the timing, Stallion Gate is a very fine and thoughtful novel.

Coming as it does between two major novels featuring the Russian detective, Arkady Renko, Stallion Gate occupies an interesting position in Smith's development. Having begun as a pulp writer, Smith moved into what might be called increasingly ambitious pulps in the Gypsy novels and in Nightwing (1977). (In a sense, Stallion Gate returns at a higher level to some of the the4004 matic concerns of Nightwing, with a Pueblo army sergeant replacing the Hopi deputy sheriff.) Then, in Gorky Park (1981), he used the formula of a subgenre of the detective story as the basis for an ambitious novel which presented and criticized a complex social reality. Stallion Gate takes a further step away from popular conventions. The operative formula here — that of espionage fiction — provides only an intermittent, minor plot line. In the end, neither Capt. Augustino nor the reader cares much when Joe exposes Klaus Fuchs as the actual threat to the security of the project; the interest of the novel lies elsewhere. The issue of subversion is the central one, but the real subversives prove to be Oppenheimer and his team, and Ben and Roberto, and even Capt. Augustino. The jazz variations on the conventional formula are what really matter in the novel.

Key Questions

Despite its affiliations with popular literary genres, Stallion Gate should be approached as a deliberate work of fiction; formally as well as thematically, it is an ambitious novel. Significantly, it is Smith's one novel which does not belong to a series. There has been no sequel. Liberated by the success of Gorky Park, Smith composed a novel intended to stand alone as a literary achievement. It should be read as his claim to be taken seriously as a novelist. It surely justifies that claim.

Smith exploits a number of established fictional forms — the detective novel, the spy novel, the western novel, even the historical novel — to construct his narrative. The conventions of any of these forms can be the starting point for discussion of his achievement. How has he, for example, stretched the formulas of the spy novel to make his points? Some of the characters and plot elements clearly derive from espionage stereotypes, but equally clearly the novel presses them beyond their stereotypical functions. Is Stallion Gate limited by Smith's decision to begin with formulas? Do the characters and plot elements succeed in expanding convincingly beyond their conventional roles? Or do his formulaic premises allow him an unusual opportunity to develop his themes?

1. How does landscape — the terrain, the seasons, the human alterations — affect Smith's description of the struggles of his characters?

2. How does Smith contrast the scientific and the Native American ways of attempting to exercise control over nature?

3. How does Smith contrast the various ways his characters attempt to control one another?

4. How successful is Smith's grafting of a fictional melodrama onto the historical record of the creation of the atomic bomb?

5. Compare Smith's presentation of Native American culture with that of Tony Hillerman or Leslie Marmon Silko.

Literary Precedents

Although Stallion Gate is a serious novel, there are certainly precedents for several aspects in popular fiction.

Espionage novels have, of course, a long history. The work of writers such as le Carre and Deighton is perhaps most relevant in the care with which they research the action and environments of their novels. Although they are written to a slightly different standard, the Matt Helm novels of Donald Hamilton may also be cited, especially as Hamilton and his hero are both avowed westerners, and several of the novels are set in Arizona and New Mexico. The Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee novels of Tony Hillerman are detective stories rather than spy stories, but they share Smith's fascination with the Indian cultures of the Southwest. Finally, Smith's vision of Native American experience can be compared with that of such Native American authors as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko.

Related Titles

The protagonist of Nightwing is Youngman Duran, a Hopi Indian deputy sheriff on a Southwestern reservation who is torn between the white and native worlds. With one foot in each camp and his fundamental allegiances in neither, Duran's cultural ambivalence makes him a uniquely sensitive instrument for recording the conflicts between traditional and technological forces that recur throughout Nightwing's account of an invasion by bloodthirsty vampire bats.

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