Summer at the Lake Short Guide

Summer at the Lake by Andrew Greeley

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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

Because of the techniques used to tell the story, each of the three main characters is given a complete history, which provides them with significant depth. The minute character history provided by Greeley plus the techniques he chooses to tell this story led one book reviewer to call the novel "an elliptical—and endless—reminiscence." One reader-commentator on an interactive Internet website complained that the novel was overdrawn to the point of pointlessness.

Even with detailed descriptions of their childhoods, parents, failed marriages, clothing and food preferences, working conditions, and so on, Jane Devlin and Fr. Keenan tend to remain spokespersons for social issues. Jane also possesses many of the expected qualities of a romance heroine. Leo Kelly, however, has an easy style and sense of humor which create the aura of a real personality. That his experiences as a POW are responsible for the angry outbursts that weave a few brawling fight scenes into the book may be difficult for some to accept.

The villains are clearly villains, operating more as moral abstractions than as individual beings. Jane's mother represents two Irish traits that have become conventions—intense anxiety to preserve respectability and a tendency to drown reality in drink. (Declan Kiberd's Inventing Ireland (1995), a literary history, provides explanations for the Irish tendency to seek out masks and inhabit alternate realities by detailing the psychological effects of three hundred years of British colonialism on Irish people).

Italian mobsters also figure into the novel. But neither character types nor plot conventions should surprise serious readers of popular fiction. Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) andT.

S. Arthur's Ten Nights in a barroom (1854) precipitated social awareness and effected social change precisely because they hyperbolized situations and characters.

Social Concerns

Summer at the Lake is the first novel of a S trilogy in which Andrew Greeley traces the history of Chicago Irish Catholics from Armisticepresent. Like mostnovels, the major Day, 1918 to the of Greeley's other social concerns are reflections of his own social scientific research (see the biographical entry).

Most broadly, the novel deals with the struggle to make sense of the past and the social changes that seem to have erased its significance. The novel is told from the points of view of three characters: Leo Kelly, Provost and professor of political science at a premier research university in Chicago; Patrick ("Packy") Keenan, a priest in the Archdiocese of Chicago; and Jane Devlin Clare, the woman both men loved as youths.

On the simplest plot level, the past poses questions and a mystery that Leo Kelly, the focal character, intends to solve. During the summer of 1948, a car accident killed two of his friends. Although he heroically saved a third from the flames, police dragged Kelly from the scene because they thought he might have been the driver.

The victims were from rich families who lived in grand summer homes at a lake retreat that was becoming a playground for wealthy Chicagoans. Kelly was a middle-class outsider whose parents did not own property in the community. He had the use of Packy Keenan's vehicle that summer and had seen to the repair of its faulty brakes the previous day. He has always wondered why the police tried so hard to implicate him and why the brakes failed when he had been assured of their repair. Why was there a box filled with counterfeit money in the trunk? And what happened to it? If Kelly had not rescued Phil Clare that fateful day, then he would have saved Jane Devlin from the unhappy marriage she later contracted with Phil. Is it possible for Leo and Jane to put failed marriages behind them and rekindle their youthful love for one another?

On another level, the past serves as the subject of scholarly study for Kelly. As a political scientist, it is Kelly's job, he says, "to analyze." His book The Big Change argued that "the era after 1965 was the logical outcome of the enormous social and economic changes in the 'postwar era.'" Society as it had been known completely disintegrated. Education rather than inherited wealth became the key to power and economic success. Simultaneously, institutions lost their credibility.

The book won Kelly tenure, academic respect, and enough sales to ensure the kind of financial security he had envied as a youth at the lake.

It is 1978, and the fifty-year-old Kelly returns to the scene where he was once a youthful outsider to spend another summer with the Keenan family. The season becomes a quest to "rewrite time lost to give it a different meaning." On this level, the past functions as romantic nostalgia.

But the summer is also a time to reflect personally on the social changes that the academic side of Kelly has pondered only objectively. "Most of our institutions have lost

a lot of their credibility," he muses, "but no one is going to change our society very much. So the revolutionaries continue to pile up consumer goods and the radicals talk radicalism and make a lot of money and the rest of us combine suspicion of institution with personal success working for the institution. ... So Leo T. Kelly, snot-nosed poor Irish Catholic kid from the West Side becomes Provost of the University, thinks of buying a summer home at the Lake, and eats lunch at the Chicago Club."

In addition to his reflections on class differences, Kelly's primary contributions to the social concerns of the novel are his reflections on war (he was a Marine in Korea) and his commentaries on the problems of modern academia. His failed marriage (to a woman who was hired as part of a package deal designed to attract him) prompts Kelly to consider the .dilemmas of dual academic marriages.

While recruiting young academic hotshots and raising funds for endowed chairs, Kelly provides wry observations on the values of the modern university.

Fr. Packy Keenan serves as commentator on what he sees as the Catholic Church's insensitivity to the laity as evidenced by the papal encyclical Humane Vitae. Keenan went from ordination in Chicago to further studies in Rome.

Eventually, he served as secretary to the commission studying birth control during Vatican Council II. As Jane Devlin Clare's confidante, he became sensitized to the Church's inhumane definitions of marriage and sexuality and promoted a more liberal position on birth control. He serves as commentator on change and its lack in the Church and also offers insights into why contemporary priests are tempted to renounce their commitments.

Jane is the "Juliet" of the novel's concern with class conflict. She marries Phil Clare to fulfill the expectations of a mother who believed marriage was the means to upward mobility. Jane was also pregnant and needed the cover of marriage to retain social respectability.

Against her mother's wishes, she did pursue a college education. This turns out to be what saves her when her marriage and her self-image collapse. As the daughter of an alcoholic, Jane has spent her life falsely pretending. She can reconstruct the reality of the past only by turning to fiction writing. Jane is used as a commentator on the disintegration of modern marriage and the Catholic Church's failure to properly promulgate its late-1960s redefinition of annulment.

As a mother who has lost one child to the Vietnam war and another to drugs and life in a commune, she represents several specific plights of the post-1960s woman.

Techniques

Summer at theLake is divided into seven major sections, six of which bear titles that mark the progress of summer. Sometimes the dates are called by their secular names, sometimes by names that mark a Catholic feast, and sometimes by both their secular and sacred designations.

Epigraphs at the beginning of each segment express the thoughts of various writers about summer and also represent a cross-section of the sacred and the secular.

Within the major divisions of "Prologue," "Memorial Day/Pentecost," "St.

John's Night," "Fourth of July," "Mary's Day in Harvest Time," "Labor Day," and "The Feast of St. Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and all the other Angels," the narratives are again divided between a focus on the year 1948 (the summer when the world as the main characters knew it began to disintegrate) and 1978, the year of the half century of their births. In "Fourth of July," the time jumps to other years as well. Like a fireworks display, this section makes a total of eleven bursts in time and adds further exposition to the historical, social, and economic changes that seared the main characters' lives.

Within this division by years, there is yet another subdivision. The story is told by three separate narrators—Leo Kelly, Fr. Packy Keenan, and Jane Devlin Clare.

Sometimes their narratives are interior monologues. Sometimes they are firstperson narrators of a scenario. Jane's narratives switch halfway through the novel from first-person memoirs to third person omniscient point of view, reflecting her growing ability as a writer to fictionalize the past and distance herself and others from it.

Themes

The novel's epigraphs deal with the season of summer—its joy, ripeness and provision of pleasurable opportunity.

Greeley often represents pleasure in food forms. As a small child, Jane befriends Leo by purchasing him a Good Humor Bar. As an adolescent, she works in a soda fountain in the summer. Whenever Leo sees her during his youth, she is associated with delectable treats.

By contrast, the plot deals with opportunities lost, withdrawn, unseen, untaken, or misperceived. Going over it, either in mental review or with a pen in hand, is the only way to make sense of it. Greeley fills the novel with allusions to Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past (19131927; see separate entry) to underscore this theme.

There is another set of allusions to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925; see separate entry). Leo Kelly at first unconsciously, then with deliberate consciousness, compares himself to Gatsby's Nick—an outsider and distant observer of the nouveau rich and their careless pursuits. When Jane's brothers endow a Chair of Irish Studies at the university, Kelly wryly accepts it less as a gift than as proof for the thesis of his scholarly book.

Bad money may follow good money, but modern universities welcome it nonetheless.

In unpublished correspondence, Andrew Greeley wrote: "Summer at the Lake is about second chances—and whether you get a third chance if you blow the second. Does God give us AT chances? Or should I say C chances?" The themes of water as renewal /baptism and summer as a time of pleasurable indulgence are combined with a theme that permeates the whole of Greeley's writing—that men and women are signs/sacraments to each other of God's enduring love. Sensual indulgences such as skinny-dipping or eating double-chocolate ice cream bars may not be the common symbol systems theologians use to represent the presence of God's love, but they are Greeley's shorthand. The novel ends with an allusion to James Joyce as Jane echoes Molly Bloom's sensual, "Yes," she said, "yes."

Another common theme of Greeley's novels is that the Church is not its hierarchy, but its people. Fr. Keenan finds support in the Catholicism of the Keenan family, if not always in the workings of the Church itself.

Adaptations

Summer at the Lake has been adapted for two audio cassettes. One is full length (840 minutes); the other is an abridged version (180 minutes).

Key Questions

A reader needs to be neither Catholic nor Irish to form strong opinions concerning Andrew Greeley's novels. Discussions can center around both the manner of his storytelling and the content he presents. Because of this, they can serve as excellent exercises in how various and often opposing literary opinions can be formed, and whether or not they are supported by valid or invalid evidence.

And because so much of what he writes is drawn from his own research, Greeley can also serve as a springboard from fiction into other genres. The seeds of his novels can be found in many of his sociological and theological books as well as in his poetry and personal journals. In many cases, actual scenes from the novels can be traced quite directly to passages in his other writings. "Fiction is the best way of getting . . . insights through the secular barriers into general culture," he has said. Greeley's works can provoke an interesting debate about why a writer whose works are grounded in the empirical data he uncovers might be called unrealistic by critics.

1. Focus on how the novel details traditional elements of Catholic belief and list some things that formed the pasts of the three main characters. What elements are altered in the thirty years of their maturity? What beliefs remain the same?

2. Discuss what Fr. Packy means when he advocates the practice of "selective Catholicism." In what ways do Jane, Leo, and Packy begin to practice this? How does this alter their lives for better or worse? What is your personal reaction to this Greeley viewpoint?

3. Catholicism has traditionally been marked by two distinctive features: a ban on artificial birth control and a ban on divorce. How does the novel reconcile modern lifestyles with these two issues?

How does Greeley alleviate Catholic guilt about violating these Catholic prescriptions?

4. Why, toward the end of the novel, do Jane and Leo still feel that there are family barriers between them?

5. Discuss what you think Leo means by "church" when he says, "They were all there, the Keenan family church, standing by one of their own."

6. Greeley's name often appears on library "If you liked . . . then read" lists.

Most of his list companions are women writers. In what ways do his descriptions of characters and his focus on details such as their clothing and food choices compare to those of female writers you have read? How do the story lines compare or contrast? Could he succeed writing under the pseudonym "Andrea" Greeley? Or are there characteristics of his work that betray his gender?

7. How does Greeley's vision of life compare to that of other authors who have created middle-aged characters who have blown a chance or two in the past?

Those who would prefer watching TV to reading another book might want to catch reruns of "The Fugitive." The more ambitious may want to look at Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Very ambitious readers may attempt one or more of the seven novels that comprise Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past.

Literary Precedents

The literary precedents are those alluded to in the novel itself: Marcel Proust, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce have dealt with the past, the careless nouveau rich, and the delights of sensuality respectively. There is also a resonance of Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again (1940). Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949) takes a hard look at his past. So does Shakespeare's King Lear. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet face the same family conflicts that originally keep Leo and Jane apart. Not all these works take the optimistic view that there is a destiny that controls our lives, however roughhewn they may seem. This is the theme that distinguishes Greeley's fiction.

Greeley's novel also incorporates many conventions of best-selling romances.

There is a strong but sensitive hero, a heroine who needs salvation, and an impediment that keeps them apart. The story is sprinkled with incremental scenes of sexuality and ends happily. Jane Devlin alludes at least twice to the novels of Anthony Trollope, noting his skill at creating sexual tension without ever detailing sexual intercourse. Had Greeley managed this feat (as he has in several of his novels), Summer at theLake might have resembled Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847; see separate entry). Readers can only wonder at his intentions when he christened the female character.

Related Titles

In the series of novels known by the collective tide The Time Between the Stars, Greeley created characters from three different families who appear in major and minor roles throughout the series (see the biographical entry and the entries on The Patience of a Saint and Fall From Grace).

Summer at the Lake is the first novel in a proposed trilogy of stories. The protagonist of the second novel, A Midwinter's Tale (1998), is Chuck O'Malley, who makes a brief appearance in the summer tale. His story is set in Germany immediately after World War II, and O'Malley is caught up in the corruption and comedy of the Army of Occupation only six months after graduation from high school. In the final novel, Younger Than Springtime (1999), O'Malley pursues a college education and discovers his true vocation as a photographer. Along the way, he also discovers true love.

Some characters in Summer at the Lake have appeared in earlier Greeley novels.

The Search for Maggie Ward (1991) details the story of how Jerry Keenan (brother of Fr. Packy) met and married his wife, a waif from Philadelphia who suffered an abusive first marriage. Maggie Ward Keenan "keeps coming back," says Greeley. "The characters who come back are usually ones that I am familiar with, and it is easier and more fun to use them instead of creating new ones."

Greeley sees Maggie as "a kind of Chorus" in his novels. She is one of the few characters who is not a native Chicagoan.

In addition, she is both a psychoanalytical psychologist and what the Irish call "fey"—possessed with the intuitive power to see what others cannot. She is, therefore, useful when other characters need direction or cannot see things for themselves. .Greeley admits that he often outfits her in grey because "Perhaps, given her past, it is a kind of armor."

Jerry and Maggie's son, Jamie, is a priest who appears in several novels and has a major role in The Cardinal Virtues.

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