Thunder Rolling in the Mountains Short Guide

Thunder Rolling in the Mountains by Scott O'Dell

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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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Contents

Characters

The narrator of Thunder Rolling in the Mountains is Sound of Running Feet, the daughter of Chief Joseph. In many ways she resembles O'Dell's earlier female protagonists, but her personality is less developed. She remains a chronicler of events, curiously distanced. Unlike Bright Morning, who has a complex but very deep relationship with her husband Tall Boy, Sound of Running Feet's love relationship remains in the background. Perhaps the reason is that all the events are overshadowed by the tragedy of Chief Joseph, and that the unhappy outcome is a foregone conclusion from the very first page.

The character of Chief Joseph is closely modeled on his historical counterpart. He is not a literary creation but rather a biographical product of known facts. Even his speech consists of recorded utterances, such as the famous "I will fight no more forever." O'Dell does not create personal relationships for him — even his relationship with his daughter Sound of Running Feet is not developed.

Swan Necklace, one of the few fictional characters in this novel, is probably the most developed. Although he plays a minor part as the intended husband of Sound of Running Feet, he undergoes growth and change. The reader sees him first as a peaceful artist — he paints blankets and is working on the wedding blanket for his own wedding — who is forced to accompany two of the main troublemakers, Red Moccasin Tops and WahLit-Its. Reluctant at first, he becomes a fierce fighter and advocate of resistance, representing the attitude of many of the young Nez Perce braves.

His death is as purposeless as many of the tragic events; he is treacherously killed for a saddle by some Assiniboin Indians.

The remaining characters are mainly historical figures playing out their roles. There is Looking Glass, the renowned but not always prudent leader, Ollokott, Chief Joseph's brother, Toohul-huol Sote, each a famous Indian warrior, and on the side of the U.S.

Army, General Howard, determined to subjugate the Nez Perce, and Colonel Miles, who treacherously breaks the treaty with Chief Joseph. They are not developed as characters beyond their roles in the events.

Social Concerns

In his earlier novels about Native Americans, O'Dell seems to offer a prospect of hope. His young protagonists endure suffering, but at the end they see a brighter future. In Sing Down the Moon (1970), this future is possible when the protagonist and her husband turn their backs on civilization and return to their old way of life. The same is true in Zia (1976), where Karana flees from the white society and returns to the natural environment she has known for most of her life. Thunder Rolling in the Mountains offers no such solution. It is dominated by the pessimism of Chief Joseph who declares that there is no refuge left for his people.

He compares the white settlers to sand on the shore and predicts that they will wipe out all the Indians. Nevertheless, he agrees with the young leaders who counsel escape to Canada. The change from O'Dell's earlier novels is notable — there is a sense of futility here that did not appear before. No longer is it possible for the Nez Perce to find freedom and salvation in the solitude of nature and their old way of life. There is no place to hide.

In no other of O'Dell's novels dealing with native American themes has the conflict between the whites and the Indian been so tragic as in Thunder Rolling in the Mountains. This may be partly due to the historical events surrounding Chief Joseph and his people.

Few Indian leaders were as careful about coexisting with the whites, and few were hounded as persistently by the U.S. Army as the Nez Perce. Ironically, their final defeat comes when they are almost within reach of freedom, only a short distance from the Canadian border, and it is brought on because of Chief Joseph's humanity, and his refusing to sacrifice the old and the children of his tribe to the rigors of escape.

Techniques

O'Dell's books are characterized by their evocative and unique style. This, his last novel, offers fewer of the colorful and detailed descriptions that are found in his earlier works. This may be because the book was completed by his wife, based on notes he was developing before his death. Where the dialogue in his earlier books was descriptive and added a unique dimension to his characters, here it mostly chronicles events.

One of the reviewers of the book, Margaret Bush, says of the novel: "Events and characters are sketched quickly, and the many short scenes of the trek and the fighting become a sort of awful travelogue." There is little room for descriptions of natural harmony between the people and their land, perhaps because such a harmony is no longer possible.

Themes

Man's inhumanity to man might well be the title of the theme of this novel.

Even though Joseph has tried to live in peace with the whites, and even though his people ask nothing more than to be left alone, they are driven from their homeland, deprived of their horses and cattle which represent their livelihood, and hunted like wild animals. The same settlers who are helped by the Indians, turn informers on them.

Not one of the white people, from miners to homesteaders to various military leaders ever seems to have considered the Indians as human beings. Their behavior stands in direct contrast with Chief Joseph's actions.

When the Indians capture some white women, they release them and even give them horses. When the army encounters a village of women and children, it butchers them as enemies.

There is not the least consideration given to even their most reasonable request. They are ordered to evacuate their homeland in the Wallowa mountains in early spring. When their leaders point out the difficulty of crossing the rivers swollen by spring run-off, and ask for a later time, they are disregarded. As a result, they lose most of their cattle, and their old people and children are endangered.

Not all the Nez Perce agree with their leader, and many feel, as Joseph's own daughter Sound of Running Feet does, that it would be better to fight than to give in. Yet they are overruled by Joseph who feels that shedding blood is wrong, unless they are forced to defend themselves. Every time the Nez Perce take a stand and fight, they win, but their victories become hollow as the final confrontation approaches inevitably. If we stand and fight, Joseph admonishes, the end will only come more swiftly.

Key Questions

The story of Chief Joseph is one of the most famous episodes in the history of the West. As in his earlier novels, O'Dell sees the whites as alien despoilers. The question arises whether O'Dell's descriptions of Indian life and the depiction of native American characters are perhaps too idealistic. How accurate is his portrayal? Is it influenced by the "noble savage" concept of the eighteenth century? Are the settlers overdrawn, since they are all morally corrupt? Do O'Dell's stories portray a historic period or a nostalgic memory?

How do they compare with other famous Westerns such as Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales and McMurtry'sLonesome Dove (1985)? A discussion of the settling of the West may also lead to larger issues such as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

1. There is a strong sense of fate in this last novel of Scott O'Dell. From the very beginning, Chief Joseph states that the tragedy of his people is unavoidable and merely a matter of time.

Why does he feel that way? Even as the Indians are winning battle after battle, there is a sense of doom hanging over them. Does this mean that Chief Joseph was an inept leader or merely a realist?

2. Sound of Running Feet is much less developed than O'Dell's earlier Indian heroines. What is her function in the novel? Why did O'Dell show us the story through the eyes of a young girl and not Joseph's or at least one of his warriors'? Would the story have presented itself in a different way through a different narrator?

3. The tragedy of the Nez Perce is the tragedy of Joseph, but Sound of Running feet and Swan Necklace survive the hardships and almost reach Canada. Swan Necklace dies at the hands of hostile Indians rather than white soldiers. What is the purpose of this episode in the novel? Why did O'Dell chose this fate? After all, his character Swan Necklace is not a historic figure, and the manner of his death is the author's invention. Why does he not allow the young people to make a new start as he did in Sing Down the Moon?

4. In earlier novels, one of O'Dell's themes is the harmony between man and nature. This is not an issue in Thunder Rolling in the Mountains. Does the author feel that there is no possibility of such a harmony any more? How has the situation changed since Karana made a life for herself on a deserted island, and Bright Morning returned to rebuilding her life at the canyon with one sheep and one lamb?

5. Like the heroes of classic tragedy, Chief Joseph sees his world crumble.

What is his tragic flaw?

Literary Precedents

There are a number of accounts dealing with the actual story of Chief Joseph and his people. O'Dell draws heavily upon these sources and stays close to them. Essential to the book's existence are two eyewitness accounts compiled by Lucullus V. McWhorter: Yellow Wolf: His Own Story (the recollections of Chief Joseph's nephew) and Hear Me, My Chiefs! (based on eyewitness accounts on both sides) as well as Chief Joseph's Own Story (1925), which he told on his trip to Washington D.C.

in 1897.

The story of Chief Joseph is only one of many cases of fatal confrontations between the U.S. Army and the Indians. The prototype is probably Custer's Battle at the Little Bighorn, which has been the subject of several often conflicting accounts, including Evan S. Connell's Son of the Morning Star (1984), a highly colored retelling by his wife, and the massacre at Wounded Knee which has been covered in Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (1970) by Dee Brown.

Related Titles

A number of O'Dell's own novels tell about fatal cultural clashes between Indians and whites in both North and South America, among them The Captive (1979), The Feathered Serpent (1981), and The Amethyst Ring (1983), which deal with the conquest of the Mayan empire by the Spanish.

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