

Trout Fishing in America Short Guide

Trout Fishing in America by Richard Brautigan

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Characters

The unnamed narrator is the only significant character in this antinovel that mocks traditional approaches to characterization, and his character can only be guessed at by carefully judging his manner of narration. His passivity indicates that his purpose is to understand rather than to change. He treats the beautiful and the grotesque equally, and this sense of objective disengagement makes his vision of America convincing. Trout Fishing in America — a Protean phrase applied to people, a place, a hotel, a pen nib, a state of mind, and the book itself — becomes a kind of character in the book, a fragile evocation of the spirit of pastoral America that is whimsically embodied in various objects and people.

Other characters (the narrator's "woman," Pard, Mr. Norris, Art) are minimally drawn, usually appearing in only a single chapter. They are elements in a documentary collage that includes historical characters (Richard Nixon, Henry Miller, Ed Sullivan, Andrew Carnegie, Caryl Chessman, and "Pretty Boy" Floyd are examples) and artifacts of popular culture (bumper stickers, films, diaries, packing labels, tombstone inscriptions, recipes, and numerous warning signs).

Social Concerns

Although published in 1967 and popularized as a counterculture book, *Trout Fishing in America* was written in 1961 as a late expression of the San Francisco Beat movement. Like the other Beats, Brautigan was affected by the Depression and World War II, and he saw in these historical periods of poverty and violence truths about America and human nature that could not be hidden by the complacent commercialism of the 1950s.

Yet the social issues of the Beats — McCarthyism, nuclear tests, capital punishment, and materialism — are only a part of the environment of which Brautigan writes. His book is actually concerned with American culture on the broadest scale, including the dreams and fantasies which define the meaning of America for ordinary citizens.

Instead of a battle between revolutionaries and an entrenched establishment, Brautigan's book explores the subtler and more pervasive contest between defining fantasies: his nostalgic image of America as pastoral idyll against the consuming, materialistic fantasies produced by Wall Street and Hollywood.

Techniques

The book comprises forty-seven "chapters," actually semi-autonomous prose poems or vignettes. There is no obvious narrative, and many critics have convincingly argued that such a book should not be called a novel at all. However, some commentators have shown that *Trout Fishing in America* is more purposeful than it seems at first.

Chapters can be grouped by setting — the North Beach area in San Francisco, the Pacific Northwest of the narrator's childhood, a series of trout streams visited on fishing trips — or linked by repeated images and motifs. Most importantly, the consistency of the narrator's voice and the strength of the central themes unify this novel. In contrast, the prose poems that compose *Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962-1970* (1971) stand as individual pieces.

In *Trout Fishing in America* Brautigan uses an abbreviated, simplistic prose that is enlivened by his striking use of metaphor. The result is an approximation of spontaneous prose in which symbols and metaphor are used to create a concise complex of thought.

The author's effort to escape linearity is also seen in his emblematic use of the cover photograph and the various "signs" he reproduces as ironic examples of "found poetry."

Despite its dark portrait of America, *Trout Fishing in America* is a funny book. In part its humor derives from Brautigan's technical nonconformity, for his book repeatedly refutes his reader's literary expectations. Its satire is indirect, gradually becoming clear as the narrator's dispassionate and fragmentary description of the sad contradictions of American life takes form.

The book is also openly parodic. Brautigan rewrites Hemingway ("Sea, Sea Rider"), Thoreau, Steinbeck ("The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari"), Melville ("Trout Fishing on the Bevel"), and others as one more demonstration of America's trivialization of beauty and spirit.

Themes

Trout Fishing in America is not a didactic book. Although it portrays an America of victims, a society with an endless capacity to transform beauty into saleable commodities, a world scarred by the decay and death of spirit, the book does not promote a program of reform. There is no hope of melioration, for the book's underlying philosophy, derived largely from Zen Buddhist thought, holds that life is repetitive and essentially determined.

Such a view leaves no room for heroism and sees social progress as illusory. Brautigan's distrust of collective enterprise sets him apart from both the socially conscious writers of the 1930s and the hippies of the 1960s. Trout Fishing in America, like *A Confederate General from Bug Sur* (1964), suggests that any communal effort is futile. For Brautigan, social activism is supplanted by the individual imagination's effort to maintain and defend a vision of America, "often only a place in the mind," against the onslaught of experiential reality. In this sense, the explicit theme of Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, which was published in 1961 as Trout Fishing in America was being written, fits Brautigan's book: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

The central image of trout fishing suggests Brautigan's theme. Through his narrator, the author "fishes" for something of value in contemporary America, but like Alonso Hagen, the failed fisherman whose diary is discovered in "Trout Fishing on the Streets of Eternity" Brautigan's search proves to be "an interesting experiment in total loss." Thus, Trout Fishing in America examines the American optimism for which it can find no basis in experience. In the first chapter Brautigan describes a statue of Benjamin Franklin, the great American optimist, in a park surrounded by people waiting for a handout, and he quotes an ironic line from Kafka: "I like the Americans because they are healthy and optimistic."

One of the last chapters describes the Cleveland Wrecking Yard, the fantastic repository of the shattered bits of the American dream.

Literary Precedents

The attitude of general acceptance that pervades Trout Fishing in America and Brautigan's democratic use of diverse cultural materials hearkens back to Walt Whitman, but Brautigan does not share Whitman's optimism.

His most immediate influences are the Beat writers of the late 1950s: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder. Through them he is profoundly influenced by Zen Buddhism and the compressed vision of the haiku as written by Japanese masters such as Basho (1644-1694). The wit of Basho, who when challenged to write a haiku that mentioned the famous eight views of Omi, simply described the sound of the temple bell at Mii-dera in a thick mist that hid the other "views," becomes the whimsy of Brautigan, who "always wanted to write a book that ended with the word Mayonnaise."

Trout Fishing in America can be profitably read as an ironic companion to Hemingway's story "Big Two-Hearted River." In Hemingway's story, young Nick Adams, scarred by his experience in World War I, escapes to the natural world of the trout stream where he begins to rebuild a sense of purpose.

When Brautigan's narrator goes fishing, he finds dead fish, cyanide pills, and F.B.I. agents.

Related Titles

Revenge of the Lawn: Stories 1962-1970 (1971) contains the "lost chapters" of Trout Fishing in America, two pieces intended for the earlier book. "Rembrandt Creek" and "Carthage Sink" both deal with nature's relation to art, and Brautigan says they were written "toward a vision of America."



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