True Grit Short Guide

True Grit by Charles Portis

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Characters

If Portis ultimately gives fiction no character other than Mattie Ross, he will have drawn someone whom critics have not hesitated to mention in the same line with Huck Finn and other immortals of American fiction. Her spunk, vein of iron, honesty, loyalty, and determination join with her frontier spirit of self-reliance and her deep faith in her church and God to make her lastingly memorable. Even though she looms larger than life, a figure from a tall tale or legend, she seems true to life, at least the life of frontier America in its heroic era. She becomes the embodiment of true grit, an exemplar of the cliche that "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Good and strong as she is, and partly because she is strong and good, she stands in vivid contrast to another character, Rooster Cogburn. Fat, oneeyed, and often sottish, prone to shoot first and ask questions later, Rooster, finally, has more than just true grit to recommend him. He values loyalty, forthrightness, friendship, and true grit in others. Portis masterfully blends the stereotypical bad guy and good guy in Rooster, contrasting and comparing him to the outlaw Lucky Ned Pepper and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf. Portis comes away with a cross between an antihero and a hero. The precarious balance of the two worked for Portis but fell more than flat in the Hollywood sequel, Rooster Cogburn. To carry off Portis's daring blend demanded all the acting talents of John Wayne, who helped immeasurably to fix the image of a slovenly but gritty lawman in the popular mind.

Norwood Pratt, the only other Portis creation likely to earn a place in the pantheon of popular figures in American fiction, confronts life with the good nature of a Huck Finn made a bit more sophisticated after a flight west to California and a hitch in the U. S. Marine Corps. Norwood is an updated Bunyan's Pilgrim, Voltaire's Candide, Mark Twain's Huck Finn, and Wolfe's George Webber. Norwood's passage through life is a trek through an American version of a "Bartholomew" or Vanity Fair (1848). Mean and loathsome as that world sometimes is, Norwood hones in on the truly honorable, trustworthy, loving persons still to be found and manages to look forward to a decent life for himself and the bride, Rita Lee, that he finds on a Trailways bus.

Portis seems to delight in drawing humorous characters in a tradition carrying back through Charles Dickens and Ben Jonson. He likes to focus on a dominant trait or humor) and trace what happens to characters who have particular personality quirks. Examples of such characters appear in Ray Midge and Dr. Symnes of The Dog of the South, and Lamar Jimmerson and Cezar Golescu in Masters of Atlantis.

Jimmy Burns marks a return to the more complex types of character explored in True Grit. Jimmy has drifted into criminal activity (dealing in Mayan artifacts) but has gone straight. As he tries to live honorably, he must deal with criminals, crooks, questers, con artists, and assorted weirdos who have strayed into Mexico. He finally shows that he has depth of decency akin to that of Mattie Ross.

Social Concerns

Central to all Portis's novels are abiding concerns for standards of decency in human conduct, fair play, justice, self-reliance, adaptability, restlessness, and the need to be attached to a place and a group of kindred souls.

All of these concerns surface in True Grit, many of them in the person of Mattie Ross, the self-reliant youngster from near Dardanelle in Yell County, Arkansas, who will brook nothing short of revenge for the murder of her father by the restless and uprooted farm hand Tom Chaney. Naive as she is in her fourteenth year when she sets out to avenge her father's death, Mattie must learn how to deal with adults and institutions and to exact from them fair play, whether it be in horse-trading or man-hunting. That same sense of fair play lies behind Ray Midge's attempt to retrieve his Ford Torino and his wife when Guy Dupree takes both of them and leaves behind his old 1963 Buick Special (The Dog of the South, 1979). At the end of his chase, in Belize, British Honduras, to recover his car and wife, Ray takes a room in Fair Play Hotel, ironically named as things turn out.

Like Ray and Mattie, Norwood Pratt demands decency and fair play in his dealings with others. The driving force behind his trip to New York City to find his old buddy from the Marines is his belief that the only decent thing for Joe William Reese to do is to pay back the seventy dollars, never mind any interest, he borrowed out in California.

"Joe William should have come by and paid him. He would have if he had owed the money." Certain standards of decency must not be ignored if humans are to live, work, or play together, and those standards apply to trigger-happy slovenly, hard-drinking Rooster Cogburn in True Grit, to bookish, incredulous, lazy Lamar Jimmerson in Masters of Atlantis (1985), or any other Portis character with any trace of human dignity left.

Portis's concern for restlessness, reflected most obviously in the deeds of Rooster Cogburn and the outlaws in True Grit, becomes more pointed in Dog of the South and Masters of Atlantis.

Drifters, schemers, hucksters, con men, seekers of arcane wisdom, hippies, and fugitives from justice swirl through the pages of these novels. The reasons for the restlessness range from something as deeply philosophic as Sir Thomas Browne's notion that man is nature's true amphibian, an earthbound creature seeking a spiritual home, to something as mundane as jumping bail. (It is noteworthy that Portis quotes Sir Thomas Browne on restlessness as a preface to Dog of the South.) Less difficult to understand, because more attuned to the American Dream, is Norwood's restlessness. He dreams of becoming a star in country and western music and seeing his name alongside those of Hank Williams and Hank Snow. For fame such as theirs he could leave his home in Ralph, Texas. A new twist on the theme comes in Gringos (1991) when Louise, a divorcee, wants to win the wandering Jimmy Burns as her new husband.

Portis also has a continuing concern for sloganeering, advertising, and linguistic obfuscation. Both as journalist and novelist, Portis recognizes how potent words are, how easily they may be manipulated to help or harm other people. Coming from the mind and heart of Mattie Ross, a linguistic conservative, words disarm persons with less strength of character than she has or spur people on to do her will. From the mouth of someone like Austin Popper or Sir Sydney Hen of Masters of Atlantis, words can beguile or mislead those who hear or read them. From the hand of Ray Midge, words are often the flotsam and jetsam of verbal garbage picked up from the airways or from the print media.

Both out of sympathy and loathing (in the manner of Sinclair Lewis rather than H. L. Mencken), Portis also has a concern for American misfits, eccentrics, members of the lunatic fringe, and oddballs of whatever idiosyncratic weight, height, size, and color. His most celebrated misfit is, of course, Rooster Cogburn, but oddballs populate the pages of his other novels, ranging from Edmund B. Ratner, formerly the "world's most perfect small man" in Norwood (1966), to Morehead Moaler, a Texas citrus farmer who buys a trailer to serve as the temple of Gnomonism. Indeed, few of Portis's characters could be described as normal.

Techniques

The quest, journey, chase, and picaresque adventure all lie behind Portis's fictional methods. His technique is as old as Homer's and as new as Barry Hannah's or John Barth's, for Portis characters must be up and going.

Sometimes they must be up and going after someone else, hence the chase motif, something popularized by Western novels and movies. A quest for revenge and a chase to find Tom Chaney and the bandit outlaws he teams up with give True Grit its structural form.

Picaresque adventure provides the structure of Norwood and Dog of the South. Although picaresque elements help to give form to Masters of Atlantis, Portis uses a more complex structure in that work, tracing a conflict and then an uncertain resolution among various factions of American Gnomonism. A combined interplay of characters at a Mexico hotel and a journey by river to ancient Mayan sites provide the structural base for Gringos.

Confessing that whatever he attempts "soon turns to farce," Portis enjoys parody, both of form and tone.

Like Mark Twain and other humorists of the South and Southwest, he wants to see what happens when an innocent goes abroad in the larger world of America, ventures away from near Dardanelle in Yell County, Arkansas; from Ralph, Texas; or even from Little Rock. The ensuing contrast between expectation and reality gives Portis ample room to be satiric, poignant, faithful to the sounds and sights of American life, and able to reflect values carried over from a conservative Presbyterian and agrarian background.

His technique is marked also by the lean, clean style he developed as a journalist, but he shows linguistic sophistication in borrowing both a deadpan manner and the language of religious and domestic sentimentality from the nineteenth century. He is also attuned to the slang and advertising jargon of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, he manages to avoid a barrage of obscene or taboo words while recording the adventures and misadventures of his twentieth-century protagonists. Like Southern and Southwestern storytellers working in the oral tradition, Portis can tell a rip-roaring tale without being foul-mouthed.

Themes

All of Portis's social concerns appear as themes, some minor, others major, in his novels. Justice and revenge, major themes in True Grit, are minor ones in The Dog of the South, whereas restlessness, a minor theme in True Grit, is the major theme of The Dog of the South and Gringos. Because Mattie Ross, a Bible-quoting Presbyterian, believes stoutly in the doctrine of "an eye for an eye," nothing stops her short of a full measure of vengeance. She is as relentless as a fury and requires Rooster Cogburn to give her full measure for the money they agree upon as his price for tracking down her father's murderer. She wants justice meted out in the place, Fort Smith, where her father was slain, but, more than that, she wants Tom Chaney to pay with his life if circumstances prevent his being tried for murder. Almost as singlemindedly as Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter (1850) or Ahab in Moby Dick (1851), she demands satisfaction. Ray Midge and Norwood Pratt also want satisfaction, but they can be easily distracted and have much more charitable hearts than Mattie. They are more like Tom Jones or Huck Finn than Hawthorne's and Melville's monomaniacs. Ray and Norwood can also experience love, an emotion that Rooster Cogburn may have aroused in Mattie, but the theme of love assumes major proportions in Norwood and The Dog of the South and surfaces from time to time in Masters of Atlantis. Even though Mattie may suppress her emotions, she suffers no iota of spiritual dry rot, a theme given much attention in Dog of the South and Masters of Atlantis. Like all the major characters in Portis's novels, Mattie must learn to cope with a world filled with crooks, charlatans, and oddballs. Hence a major theme linking every Portis novel is outlawry and nonconformity.

Adaptations

Marguerite Roberts adapted both True Grit and Norwood for the screen.

The film of True Grit was true to the novel with only a few changes, the most important being that Texas Ranger LaBoeuf dies in the shootout with the outlaws and Rooster Cogburn comes to visit Mattie after she recovers and returns to her home near Dardanelle. The 1969 film starred John Wayne, Kim Darby, Robert Duvall, and Glenn Campbell.

Norwood (1970) is an entirely different matter. Although an ex-Marine is the protagonist and many of the characters in the screenplay bear the names Portis gave them, the story line gathers some Hollywoodish complications, many of them worked in to enable Glenn Campbell to use his musical talents. The most radical departure involves a performance by Norwood in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse.

Neither Marguerite Roberts nor Portis had a hand in the screenplay for Rooster Cogburn (1975), a vehicle for John Wayne and Katherine Hepburn.

Allegedly, Hal Wallis, his wife, Martha Hyer, and some of their friends wrote the screenplay under the pseudonym of Martin Julien. The film tries to imitate both True Grit and The African Queen, with wretched success.

Literary Precedents

Portis's literary forebears are Cervantes, Thomas Nashe (Jack Wilkie of Dog of the South is another unfortunate traveler like Nashe's Jack Wilton in The Unfortunate Traveler, 1594), Voltaire, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Johnson J. Hooper, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. There is also more than a dash of Henry Fielding, Ring Lardner, and Sinclair Lewis in Portis's background. In short, his favorite mode is comic, and he favors "white" comedy over black. Even though True Grit owes much to the comic tradition represented by the writers just listed, Portis draws upon the traditions of the epic, the legend, the tall tale, and the bildungsroman in creating Mattie Ross and Rooster Cogburn and establishing a quest for them to undergo. Their tests and their character traits ultimately come to represent the ordeal of a nation rapidly expanding its frontiers while trying to redefine its civil order and to discover the kinds of men and women needed to make an emerging new style of life work as outlawry and rugged individualism threatened old ideas of civilization. Thus, it seems fair to think of Gilgamesh, Beowulf, Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, Calamity Jane, Huck Finn, and Ike McCaslin as kindred spirits to Mattie Ross and Rooster Cogburn. Tom Jones, Captain Farrago, and Huck Finn are counterparts of Norwood Pratt. Don Quixote, Teague O'Regan, Huck, the Duke and Dauphin, Lucius Priest, and Ned William McCaslin pass along traits to Ray Midge and Dr. Reo Symes. Some of the drifters of Gringos could also be taken as kinfolk.

The oddballs and freaks appearing in Masters of Atlantis would be right at home in stories by Hooper, George Washington Harris, Lardner, and O'Connor. Jimmy Burns, though he has traits linking him to characters appearing in the American pantheon, finally has something Homeric about him, a man who stands up against the pollution and corruption visited upon Mexico by crooked, foul, and criminal gringos.

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