

A problem of american dream in montana 1948 novel

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Growing Pains

Larry Watson demonstrates everything wrong with small-town America in the 1940s with his novel *Montana 1948*. The post-war, American town of Bantrock falls short of the “ American dream” in numerous ways. Larry Watson explores a vast number of these themes throughout the novel *Montana 1948*.

One of the most largely explored themes is David’s loss of innocence and transition into adulthood. As the novel progresses the reader can see David, the main character and son of Wesley and Gail Hayden, becoming more of a sexual being. David notices Marie Little Soldier, David’s teenage, Indian caretaker, and recognizes her as a person but views her in a sexual way as he notices her more explicit features. The reader might interpret their relationship as puppy love; love and lust a young boy might develop for the first person he view in a sexual, or romantic, manner even if those feelings are not reciprocated. During the course of *Montana 1948* David is subjected to many “ adult” scenarios. Twelve-year-old David experiences death, for what the reader can infer is the first time, with his caretaker Marie Little Soldier. This shocking experiences confuses David as he notices his family members, such as his father, acting differently. He soon learns Frank, who is the doctor in Bantrock and Wesley’s brother, is accused of raping young, innocent, Indian women. This situation is much more than any normal twelve-year-old would regularly experience. David is forced to look at his uncle, a man that David once looked up to and aspired to be like, in a very dark light as he comes to terms with his actions. Lastly, David witnesses his

father, a person who is supposed to be strong and idolized by the son, when he is visibly weak. When Julian, David's grandfather, hears that Wesley has locked Frank in the basement as a temporary jail he becomes irate. David's grandparents come to visit and request that Frank be released, and when Wesley denies their request Julian starts verbally assaulting him. Wesley is mentally exhausted when his parents finally leave his home and David goes downstairs to investigate the situation. Watson writes that David "came into the kitchen and saw my mother sitting by the table. My father was on his knees before her, and his head was on her lap. She was rubbing his neck...." (Watson 123). Wesley is visibly weak here. David sees his father in a light that a son generally would not see, or want to see. He realizes in this moment that his father is a person just as he is, and no one is immune to human emotion. This is a key point in growing up; realizing that your parents are simply normal people like you.

Another area Watson explores is the abuse of power in Betrock. In the town of Betrock the position of Sheriff stays in a close-knit group. To achieve this infamous feat Julian would serve three terms and then hand the position over to his deputy Len McAuley. Julian would eventually retire and hand the position to his son Wesley; once again keeping the position in the Hayden family. Furthermore, to be a Hayden is to be everyone's business. In the town of Betrock the Hayden name is powerful, meaningful, and intimidating. After Julian and his wife's visit David is informed to not let them into his home, fearing the lengths they may go to in order to free their son Frank. David narrates "I was a Hayden. I knew, from the time I was very

young and without having been told, that meant something in Bentrock. Because my grandfather was wealthy and powerful, because my father-like his father before him-enforced the law, because, my uncle treated the sick and injured...people had an opinion about the Haydens". (Watson 126). This quote explains that the town of Bentrock understood, and respected, the authority of the Haydens. They had the careers, wives, and families that people dreamed of. People envied them, but in a respectful way-so as to never cross them. No doubt Frank understood his power and the respect that his position, as a medical professional, commanded. Times were different in 1948, and if a doctor was needed there was not a large selection to choose from. Numerous ill people called upon Frank, and many received good service with no complaint, but many were not as fortunate. Racism was prevalent in this era and people of different races commanded different levels of respect. In the eyes of Frank Hayden, Indians deserved little to none. As Frank saw sickly Indian girls he would sexually assault and rape them-David's late caretaker, Marie Little Soldier, being one of them. These grotesque and illegal acts were a clear abuse of power as Frank knew, or so he thought, none of the Indian girls would tell a soul.

Additionally, Watson hones in on the the idea of justice. Justice for the Indian girls is served when Frank kills himself. Frank Hayden's " rape scandal" took place in Bentrock and the surrounding towns and reservations. When he is eventually caught, and his brother will no longer sit idly by, the reader is led to assume that he is dealing with internal conflict. While Watson fails to truly explore Frank's character in Montana 1948 the reader is still able to

understand his feelings through his actions. Frank is obviously both ashamed and humiliated by his actions, and his way of escaping further embarrassment is taking his own life. Furthermore this action might be thought of as an attempt to preserve the Hayden name. The Hayden family will have justice as, with Frank's suicide, they no longer have to struggle with deciding what to do. Beforehand the Hayden's were left with deciding whether to follow the law or let Frank go as Julian wanted. Frank made this decision for them-for better or for worse. Frank escaped his reality so that his family could also escape their own. Ultimately the legal system in the United States in this " post-war" era was clearly lacking. Montana 1948 is a perfect example of the small-town justice system. Watson truly makes this point known with his building of the Hayden family. The family is nearly untouchable and holds most of what little power is in the town of Bentrock. When Wesley first hears of Frank's crimes he opts to talk with him rather than follow the law and arrest him. This is an example of the crooked justice system of the period. Those holding the power were generally free to pursue wrongdoers how they pleased with little to no checks or balances. This opinion is shared with David by Len McAuley, the town's deputy sheriff. Len takes a drink of his whiskey and starts to talk with David "' You know what your granddad said it means to be a peace officer in Montana? He said it means knowing when to look and when to look away.'" (Watson 93). Len makes perfectly clear Julian's ideals and former methods as Bentrock's sheriff. Julian expressed these feelings when he urged Wesley to let Frank go, even after being accused of multiple rapes and single murder. This quote

proves that the justice system in Bantrock was far from the law, and relied far more on favors and favorites.

Larry Watson's *Montana 1948* explores, and exemplifies, the shortcomings of Bantrock, and America as a whole, in this time period. The reader is able to grasp the concepts of the struggling American government to ensure justice throughout its lands, even in small towns such as Bantrock. Be it the corruption of justice in Bantrock, or a young boy's loss of innocence, numerous themes are explored and picked apart through the eyes of 52-year-old David. Watson leaves much to be interpreted; as a result, *Montana 1948* is a novella that changes with each reader's perspective.