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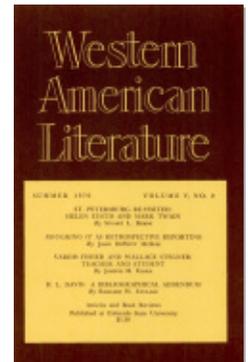
Six-Horse Hitch by Janice Holt Giles (review)

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a twenty-five or thirty year old man—cowboy, sheriff, or miner. She is a little girl, so her “frontier virtues” are ironic.

In addition to providing the reader with such delightful, and believable, characters as the elder and the younger Mattie Ross, Portis provides at least two other characters who satirize the stereotype western novel. They do so with respect rather than maliciousness, however. These two characters are Rueben “Rooster” Cogburn, and a man called, simply, LaBoef. Each of these is, in his own way, a parody of a “Western Hero.”

Rooster Cogburn is fat, in poor physical health, dishonest, a bit cowardly, given to excessive drinking, mean, low, and (in the words of the man who refers Mattie to him as a likely candidate to help her find Tom Chaney) “He is a pitiless man, double-tough, and fear don’t enter into his thinking. He loves to pull a cork.” (p. 23.) Mattie decides he is just the man to help her get Tom Chaney, for he has, in her own words, “true grit”.

LaBoef, on the other hand, is young, handsome, brave, and gallant. He seems, as the reader first becomes acquainted with him through Mattie, to be one character who represents goodness, justice, fair play, and masculine frontier virtue. Mattie, and the reader, soon discover, however, that his only motive in tracking down Chaney is the bounty currently on the members of Lucky Ned Pepper’s Gang, with whom Chaney has recently thrown in his lot.

In this way, then, by drawing satirical, but at the same time believable, characters, Portis has written a highly readable and important western novel. As it satirizes the western novel as a genre, it simultaneously imparts to that genre a new and unforgettable set of characters, led by Mattie Ross. Mattie Ross is certainly a new kind of western protagonist, and a valid one.

DONALD A. HOGLIN, *Community College of Denver*

Six-Horse Hitch. By Janice Holt Giles. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969. 436 pages, \$6.95.)

The broad category of “historical fiction” offers a number of choices to the novelist with respect to the handling of his materials. A central problem concerns the proportion of history, authentic detail, and real characters to bring into the novel—and the manner in which such elements of historical actuality will be blended imaginatively into the book’s fictional aspects. One need only observe the differing approaches on the art of Willa Cather in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Kenneth Roberts in *Northwest Passage*, Stewart Edward White in *The Long Rifle*, A. B. Guthrie in *The Big Sky*, and Vardis Fisher in *Children of God* to realize the wide variations which exist in concepts of what the historical novel is and how it achieves its unique

effect of bringing the past to life in a fashion which satisfies the reader's desire for re-creation of distant places and events, imaginatively presented knowledge, entertainment, and varying degrees of literary art.

An introduction such as this seems necessary in evaluating *Six-Horse Hitch*, the latest novel by Janice Holt Giles, an experienced author of historical fiction whose extensive publications include *Hannah Fowler*, *Johnny Osage*, *Voyage to Santa Fe*, and *The Great Adventure*. Set mostly in southern Nebraska and northern Colorado between 1859 and 1869, *Six-Horse Hitch* draws its basic materials from the heyday of stagecoaching and the history of the Overland Mail and Stage Line in particular. Mrs. Giles deserves high praise for her research, commitment to authentic detail, and presentation of a segment of Western life largely ignored by the novelist in favor of more obvious and easily exploited experience involving the mountain man, cowboy—even the pioneer farmer.

Indeed, one finishes the novel with such appreciation at seeing how the stages operated, the political and economic forces at work in Washington and the West related to the large transportation companies, the skills required by the drivers and hazards of their existence, the nature of trips across the West from the passengers' perspective, the operation of stagecoach stations, and so forth, that a consideration of other aspects of the book must be qualified with praise for the author's effective use of history and knowledge of stagecoaching. Perhaps because of its excellence in this regard, the more strictly fictional level must inevitably seem something of a letdown.

The central figure in the novel, Starr Fowler (from a family treated in earlier books by Mrs. Giles), is followed from the beginnings of his career as a nineteen-year-old driver through his maturity ten years later, when the railroad becomes a force ending the era of the Concord coaches. He narrates the novel, and while his entrance into the profession of driving is well-presented and believable, as is his love for that way of life, it is difficult to accept completely the sense of refinement and romantic purity which clings to him despite limited education, considerable exposure to the frontier's harshness, and a relationship—almost sexless in its presentation—with a "dance-hall girl" known as the Omaha Pearl. In contrast, the miniature characterizations of other drivers are consistently vivid and impressive, as are nearly all the scenes involving actual driving and trips over portions of the Overland route.

The central plot of the novel, involving Starr Fowler with an Eastern girl, Bernie Buchanan, is overtly melodramatic and creaky. Their relationship is star-crossed because she cannot accept his dedication to the life of nomadic driver and he fails to see in time a hidden sensuality which compels her into becoming a drudgelike squaw for a mixed-blood Ute called Popo. The knowledge that Popo is Starr's half-breed brother, which is revealed after Starr has shot him during an Indian attack, only compounds the overplotting

problem. Waiting for the right moment within the plot framework is Bucky Westmorland, a young, red-haired girl growing up at the edge of Starr's life and obviously suited by her long commitment to him and her maturing beauty—as well as phenomenal competence with horses and stagecoaches—to become his wife eventually. Bucky's capture by hostile Indians under Popo's leadership during an uprising by Sioux, Arapahoes, and Cheyennes in the later chapters of the book delays this outcome somewhat. To the novel's credit, her return is not gained by impossible heroics on Starr's part, but rather by ransom.

And finally, one cannot avoid a sense of strain at times when history related to stagecoaching or the West in general is drawn into the novel's structure in extensive blocks or too obvious conversations.

Taken on balance, *Six-Horse Hitch* succeeds in presenting a neglected area of Western experience in a soundly researched, knowledgeable manner—and with an oftentimes melodramatic, overplotted fictional flavor that a broad span of general readers should find entertaining. The more serious reader is apt to be distracted by the blend of realism and romance and a sense of unevenness in structure and focus. These facets of the book, it should be said, represent the side-effects of Mrs. Giles' particular concept of the historical novel and the manner in which it should achieve its aims. By its nature, the genre has always involved this kind of balancing out of approaches and commitments . . . strengths and compromises. The result in this case is a book which is unusually authentic and unique in background, quite readable, and yet somewhat disappointing when judged as a serious piece of literary art.

ROBERT A. RORIPAUGH, *University of Wyoming*

The Innocents. By Clyde Ware. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969. 240 pages, \$4.95.)

A lonely prospector in the desert country of Arizona Territory inadvertently approaches an Apache village, realizes that he will be killed if he tries to escape, boldly enters and tries to make friends. He succeeds, at least to the extent of proving himself harmless and saving his life. In the camp he observes a most curious situation. A small white girl is a member of the snarling Apache dog pack. A captive and an orphan, the child had not been accepted by her intended foster mother and has been ignored for a long time by the Indian band. The dogs treat her as one of their own kind. Impossible? Yes. But Clyde Ware's writing in the early parts of *The Innocents* is so persuasive that the reader willingly accepts the situation.

The prospector trades for the girl, but she will not stay with him until he takes along one of the half-wild dogs also. They live the year around in