

can't be selfish; they must always be concerned for others. This means that outlaw-heroes walk a fine line; yes, we approve of (or at least sympathize with) them robbing, harassing, or even killing people we consider "oppressors" (whether of ourselves or others), but we don't make heroes of outlaws whose chief motive seems to be their own enrichment. (Outlaws who are in it for the buck are fascinating and/or romantic—*vide* Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, etc.—but not usually heroic.)

In *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*, John Rollin Ridge finessed this one by introducing (rather belatedly, if you ask me) the notion that Joaquín was not stealing everything not nailed down for his own enrichment, but was in fact planning a great military action that would "sweep the Americans from his [Joaquín's] land"—i.e., California. To this end, he was collecting horses—obviously a logical first move. Mind you, he never does anything else toward his ultimate goal, like collecting guns, organizing a militia, or recruiting men to feed—let alone ride—the thousands of horses he's stashing away in his arroyo hideout, but occasional brief references to his grand scheme are theoretically sufficient to excuse the theme and variation of ambush, robbery, murder, and daring escape.

To me, one of the most interesting aspects of the book is its charmingly casual racism. Racism is Joaquín's chief *modus operandi*. White people are Bad, Mexicans are Good. Chinamen [*sic*] are very industrious but stink at fighting, so naturally you should rob them whenever you come across them because they always have gold and it's easy. Sometimes you kill them, too, but that's not much fun.

Non-Chinese miners are usually tough, wary, and well armed—but lots more fun to rob and kill. Indians? They're

as tough as Mexicans, less well armed, but better organized. Worthy and honorable foes, but they don't have any money. And, of course, they don't have any money because they're oppressed by the white intruders, thus forming a bond of fellowship with Joaquín and company. (It's worth noting at this point that Ridge was himself half-Cherokee and considered himself an Indian, which may have had something to do with this distinction.)

Frankly, I've seen this kind of matter-of-fact racism all my life; most people my age probably have. There's usually no particular animus to it; it's just people calling it like they see it—and how (and why) they see it is really interesting.

Ridge's book was published in 1854, slightly pre-Civil War. How old is the idea of the equality of all men before God? It's not that old. Socrates, Aristotle, all the virtuous old Greeks and Romans kept slaves as a matter of course, and the writers of the US Constitution—their noble language notwithstanding—considered slaves to be not only legal but also a fraction of a free man, for census and taxation purposes.

I've always thought that the interest (and value) of a historical piece of fiction lies in its reflection of the prevailing cultural values. How did people think in this period? Why did they believe what they did, and how did those beliefs shape their lives?

Historical fiction, however, is different from fiction from an earlier era. We don't like to think our heroes didn't believe the same things we believe, so contemporary fiction written about an earlier time often reflects the perceived attitude of the intended audience rather than the actual cultural context of the period.

Frankly, the political ideology of the twenty-first century goes hand-in-hand with a deliberate ignorance of the