

past, and depends upon it. It's interesting to note that for authors writing historical fiction today, there's considerable pressure to avoid showing cultural attitudes as they actually existed—or, if shown, to attribute these attitudes only to characters clearly drawn as despicable.

Ridge didn't suffer from such considerations: He had nothing even faintly idealistic in mind, nor was he concerned with improving social values. It's debatable—given his chronic poverty and lack of success in other endeavors—whether we might reasonably conclude that he wrote *Joaquín Murieta* for the primary purpose of making money, or whether we should accept his claim that the book is intended as a modest contribution to the history of California. In either case, the attitudes he depicts were almost certainly the attitudes he perceived his potential audience as having. Of course he wasn't writing historical fiction, but in writing about his own time he offers a really good view of the cultural context he lived in and his own audience—which is now, of course, historical.

The book is remarkably readable and entertaining, despite the Victorian style. Ridge is a master of the art of theme and variation, so while every encounter ends the same way (until *The End*), we still enjoy the ride. If you want to read a little deeper, though, the story offers a window on the real social dynamics—race, culture, and prejudices—of the time, and may offer grounds for reflection on how much things have changed. Or haven't.

In the end, I don't think Dad would have approved of Joaquín. Not because Joaquín had attitudes characteristic of his times—my dad was a politician; he understood how people worked—but because he wasn't responsible. True, he'd go rescue a friend who was about to be hanged, but he doesn't take care of his woman, and in the end he leaves her penniless and bereft, living in her parents'

home. (Cf. attitudes of the times. Women weren't interesting, beyond an occasional static role as a plot point.) And worst of all . . . he lets his pride get the better of him, and ends up with his head in a bottle.

In my dad's view of things, the good ones don't end up in a bottle. That sad end was apparently not only Joaquín's but also the author's. Ridge died at an early age of "softening of the brain" (i.e., probably acute alcoholism), but his novel lives on, both as rip-roaring entertainment and as social commentary that Ridge probably didn't intend. But books are immortal, and have minds of their own.

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