

## "If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O" Analysis

"If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O." was the first of the Ballad novels and my first hardcover, written 25 years ago. Back then, nobody in publishing thought that I or my book mattered much, so I wasn't encouraged to try to explain anything. I'm sure they didn't imagine someone would still be reading it in the 21st century.

The Class of '66 was my high school class. I borrowed yearbooks from people from all over the place to figure out some kind of pattern to that generation. The guys who went to Vietnam were my friends. As young people we said, "Give us the world and we'll fix it. We'll end war by 1975; disease in the 80's; and the rest of society's ills by 1999." But twenty-five years after graduation, the members of that generation were coming to terms with the fact that not only did they not fix all those problems, they now had to hold the newspaper at arm's length to read it.

The book is about a generation coming to terms with its own mortality. And the message may have been, "*Life is a choice between two wrong answers.*"

For women, the ones who chose careers missed having a family or felt they didn't do a good job with the kids. In the previous generation, success meant you married a doctor. In the following generation, you became the doctor yourself. But for the class of '66 there didn't seem to be any clear-cut choice. The women who married young and stayed home often found themselves divorced in middle age and struggling to support themselves. The ones who opted to put everything into a career face the possibility of an isolated old age, without family or prospects.

~ For men, Vietnam was the dividing line. Those who did not go felt like the "*gentlemen in England now abed...*" described in Henry V. But many of those who did go seemed scarred by the experience. So I was looking at people who were caught between the structured past and the freewheeling future, but they had no easy answers.

Note, though, that the physical danger in the book does not come from the past or from that generation. There's a lot of symbolism in the book. The story begins on Memorial Day and ends on the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. Even the dates on Cal Arrowood's grave stone are significant. He was born on October 25—the anniversary of Agincourt (*Henry V.*) And pay attention to Vernon Woolwine. He is the town's psychic barometer: his costume always tells you what the immediate future will be like. And note what his final message was to the crowd at the class reunion. That's ultimately what they needed to learn.

There is an essay in the book "From a Race of Storytellers" by Kimberley Holloway that analyzes the book more thoroughly. But I hope this helps. Thank you for reading my work and for caring what it all means.