Review: 'If: The Untold Story of Kipling's American Years,' by Christopher Benfey

NONFICTION: Professor analyzes imprint left by U.S. sojourn on the author's complex literary legacy.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | JULY 5, 2019 — 10:36AM

A close friend, Christopher Benfey reveals, warned him not to write a book about Rudyard Kipling. “Don't you realize,” he said, that the author of “The White Man’s Burden” is “the most politically incorrect writer in the canon?”

And so, Benfey, a professor of English at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, assures readers (a bit disingenuously) that he is not trying to “rehabilitate” Kipling. In “If,” he draws on correspondence, memoirs and “patterns of suggestion and implication” in poems, essays and stories to assess the impact of Kipling’s decadelong sojourn in the United States on his literary legacy. Ultimately, he seeks to convey Kipling’s “complexity” on a range of issues, including imperialism.

Kipling’s American period (1889-1899), including four years in Brattleboro, Vt., was among the happiest and most creative of his life. The work he produced, including “The Jungle Book” and “Captains Courageous,” Benfey demonstrates, drew on his surroundings and his conversations with political and literary luminaries.

Kipling’s tale of Mowgli among the wolves reflected his conviction that “violence was at the molten core of American life.” His visits to the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., accompanied by Theodore Roosevelt, firmed up his notion that beavers “were a colonial world in miniature” and bears were the embodiment of “brute marauding strength.” Kipling saw empire as “a realm of responsibilities”; Roosevelt saw it as a “world of opportunities.” In the seemingly plotless “Captains Courageous,” Benfey points out, it is easy to miss the novel’s “night side,” the sympathetic portrait of an African-American cook, and hints of the devastation accompanying the Depression of 1893.

The larger “patterns of suggestion and implication” identified by Benfey are provocative, if not always persuasive. Does Kipling deserve credit, one wonders, for developing the idea of “the moral equivalent of war” with William James? With “The Jungle Book,” did he come “close” to writing the Great American Novel? Does “The White Man’s Burden,” stripped of its “unashamedly racist” characterizations of Filipinos, actually describe “some of the better intentions of the American Century”? Has Kipling’s phrase, “You cannot hustle the East,” been correctly interpreted as a prescient warning to architects of the war in Vietnam? Written under the influence of “Huckleberry Finn,” does “Kim” link together “the higher and lower breeds” in a “genuine brotherhood”?

Fortunately, Benfey helps us navigate these claims. “Blindness and insight,” he concludes, “are often oddly combined in our major writers.” And Kipling’s poetry and prose “may be said to contain their own potential antidote,” in the form of a conviction he shared with Twain that “the jaded world of adult hatred and division can only be healed by new visions” — and that the hope of the future “lies in the open eyes of children.”
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