

# NOVELIST JOHN KEEBLE

BY ALLAN ROUTH

John Keeble sits on his eastern Washington state ranch of 300 acres, biting on a bullet, a man born to balance things. In his roughed-in kitchen, squarely in the center of the log house that is his home, amid the fresh pine scent of the Ponderosas he has cut with his own two hands, he sits.

At 37 years old, his hair thinning, lines of worry and frustration creasing into his face and holding there from earlier days, John Keeble is tasting the first but still difficult fruits of a long ambition. There is the ranch—300 acres of arid land, land he has worked that seems to roll forever under the hot afternoon sun; it is overwhelming to see the place, to see how he has raised from the desert a garden, a crop, a few animals. And then there is the family, healthy, strong, and proud to be on their own together in the country. But beyond this, and beyond Keeble's muddy boots and dirty workclothes, behind his pleasant, how-do-you-do smile, there is John Keeble the novelist, the new-found literary gem who has finally broken the bubble of the "easterns" and has elbowed his way into the recognized portion of the publishing world. With his third novel, titled *Yellowfish*, Keeble has finally succeeded. *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* were on the phone. *Publisher's Weekly* and the *New York Times Review of Books* spoke his name. The local Washington weeklies and Sunday supplements clamored at his rough-pine door. After two previous novels, a potpourri of articles, and a circle of literary acquaintances that ranges from Tillie Olsen in California to Ransom Jeffery in Missouri, and after years of poverty, times of confusion and disorder, times of discontent, there is now for Keeble the sweetness of victory.

Born in Canada and raised as a preacher's son along the west coast, Keeble is as much a product of the land as is his character in *Yellowfish*, Wes Erks. Keeble left the west once—a short stint of work on his doctorate at Brown on the east coast, but that, as he says, was short-lived. "I was the angry young man there, I suppose. Married, with no money, and finding Brown not to be what I thought it should have been—it was a pretty frustrating time." The one thing that Keeble resented most about Brown was the keen competition. "Not that competition is in itself a bad thing—not at all. What I resented was being forced to write on that kind of level. That wasn't for me, and neither were the departmental politics." So from Brown, Keeble returned to his precious west without his doctorate, settling in Medical Lake, Washington, near Spokane. He taught at Eastern Washington University as an associate professor in English. "I enjoyed teaching literature," he says, "it's concrete—sort of." He laughs. "Writing isn't. Maybe I shouldn't teach writing. I don't like to. College writing programs can do things, good and bad. They can give the starting writer encouragement

and strength, but they can make the mediocre writer look pretty good by teaching the angles, the hidden ropes, and they keep the dream alive for a great many who don't stand a chance. I don't know... maybe I shouldn't teach again."

Keeble's first two books—*Crab Canon* (1971) and *Mine* (1974), the latter co-written with Ransom Jeffery—were, by and large, failures. A third book was scrapped mid-way to completion, and *Yellowfish* started in its place. Keeble scrambled to sell it, changing agents—four agents so far in his career—haranguing the New York City publishing apparatus, pushing and pulling his way up. The book, published by Harper and Row, sold its first-run printing of 17,000 copies, and Keeble left school to write and ranch full-time. "When *Yellowfish* first began to be noticed, my colleagues at school treated me differently, with an excessive respect that amounted to envy. The nature of the book, the aggressive characters, the thriller nature of it, alienated many of them, especially the intellectuals. They pointed their fingers: 'He's a commercial writer, nothing more.'" And as anyone who has spent time dopping and dabbling around an English department can tell you, there is no greater slur than that.

Like its author, *Yellowfish* is deliberate, a heavy-handed novel with an assortment of deftly done touches that take it from the realm of thriller to the realm of serious fiction. It is the story of Wes Erks, a man most like Keeble, rough, unkempt, independent, unwilling to change for any reasons other than his own. Erks makes a living ranching, but he picks up extra money running illegal Chinese immigrants across the border into America, from Canada to San Francisco. The book deals with one particular load of passengers and the trek Erks makes with them. One of the passengers is a wanted man, wanted by the Triad—a Chinese Mafioso organization—and as the story progresses, the reader finds the Triad wants this one Chinaman bad enough to commit murder. On the surface, it's a cloak-and-dagger suspense story, complete with dark-colored Lincolns (belonging to the bad guys) and a noble but criminal good guy. But what has drawn attention and critical acclaim has not been the surface story, but instead the story that lies just below—the story of Erks, the story of travel and death.

Wes Erks is the last of a breed of men who, if we are to believe popular myth, were the kind largely responsible for settling the American continent. Erks resents government—"the fine print men"—and despises sing-song morality; he hates weakness, especially in himself, loves excitement, and seeks to find his ultimate capabilities and his own personal code of morality. Of course, what Erks does for extra money is illegal; but his breaking of the law is the breaking of written laws, while his compliances are with unwritten laws, the laws of humans thrown together randomly to survive as best

they can. Erks could be called a noble savage, as well as the sensitive, confused rebel. During the long haul to San Francisco, Erks discovers himself and his boundaries. He is shot at, chased, harangued, double-crossed; but he remains true to his ally, the wanted Chinese immigrant, because they have been thrown together, both with a job to do, and Erks is, in the end, successful. He is a larger-than-life hero, but still he is plausible, and the reader applauds him.

Another element of Keeble's novel that has drawn attention is the relationship that is strongly established between landforms, and history, and the present day. As Erks travels a southward route out of Canada, he associates his location with what has been there in the past—the Fraser party of explorers, the early Indians, the Donner party who were forced to survive a winter by feeding on their own dead. Erks is characterized as an amateur historian of sorts, and as he travels, the land around him piques his scholarly memory, imploring him to call up the past. It is Keeble's conviction that land, its forms and shapes and general aura, dictates who we are and who we will be. This, along with our history, makes up our own unique existence. Men of the Pacific Northwest, a sprawling, still virgin portion of America, are seen as mirror images of the land, and of the men who came before them. Erks is therefore unsettled, like his land, and has a sense of treachery of the land, what it can and has done. It is an old philosophy, this belief that land and history are the mainstays of what we are

—it is the philosophy of Jefferson, of Emerson and Thoreau. But Keeble takes it further than any of them, by still believing it in an age when most of us live in apartments or in suburbia. Keeble wonders. Without land, without our own private struggle to live what every rancher and farmer and settler has experienced, what kind of people are we becoming? Rootless, confused, spiritually exhausted?

As for the negative responses to *Yellowfish*, most mention the uncanny similarities between Keeble and his influences, notably those of Faulkner. "I resent that kind of foolishness," Keeble says, testily, "those blanket statements like that. Rhythm—my rhythm is different. It is my own. A writer is the synthesis of the writers before him. There's even an homage to Steinbeck in the book, an homage to his *The Grapes of Wrath*, and there is some of Faulkner, and Joyce, too, in the book; but I'd never read any of the Snopes stories before [stories that bear close resemblances to a few scenes in *Yellowfish*] and I've only recently read Kesey." Ken Kesey is another "problem" for Keeble, since Kesey has with his two books (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*) already established himself strongly as a national spokesman/author from the Northwest. "There are many Northwest writers," Keeble says, a bit tiredly, "other than Kesey. I'm not jockeying for a position next to or above or below him. I resent that, again. I write, and write as well as I can—I leave the rest of it to other people, it's out of my hands. Kesey is

famous. So are a hundred other writers. I'm just me—that's all there is, that's all that matters." And of other writers from the west? "Tillie Olsen is a fine writer—a combination of Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser. She skipped modernism, that 'Philip Roth' style of trash writing. We need more writers like her who aren't from New York City. And we don't need the New York City critics telling us what to read and what not to read. I'd like to see the west have its own publishing apparatus, but we don't."

"There are those writers," Keeble continues, "both dead and alive, who came before me. They're all important. But in the end, the writer is nobody when he sits to write. He must do it all over again everytime he sits down. That leaves only the individual—alone."

John Keeble walks plaintively out the front door of his log house. A heavy ax handle works as a sliding leverage weight on the door. There are no locks or latches anywhere in the house. Outside, the late day sun has turned even hotter, and the pigs are in need of watering, and the lone goose Keeble keeps for his own amusement honks for water, too. The garden's strawberries, still unbloomed, are nonetheless green and velvety. With a large dirty hand, a hand that couldn't possibly write a book, let alone three of them, and with his moustache untrimmed and hanging over his lips, John Keeble grabs up the watering hose and starts for the pigpen.

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## A Writer in Rancher's Clothes

