

Airport Short Guide

Airport by Arthur Hailey

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Characters

The cast of characters in *Airport* has been assembled to facilitate a multilayered examination of how an airport functions and to appeal to a broad audience. The characters thus include representatives of various levels of airport personnel and management and come from several social classes. In typical Hailey fashion, these characters are seen primarily from the outside with little space given over to their introspection and, for the most part, they are locked into stereotypical roles.

The heroes are the airport manager Mel Bakersfeld and the senior pilot Vernon Demerest who during the course of the novel prove their moral, ethical, and physical superiority. The role of villain is played by D. O. Guerrero, a born loser turned psychotic who intends to blow up a plane bound for Rome. Tanya Livingston and Gwen Meighen, respectively the girlfriends of the manager and the pilot, provide sentimental interest and just a touch of eroticism, while an element of pathos comes from Guerrero's desperate wife and from Mel's brother Keith, an air traffic controller contemplating suicide.

The protagonists are frequently placed in tense and dramatic situations, which sometimes threaten to be fatal, before receiving their just rewards and punishments.



Social Concerns/Themes

Like all of Hailey's novels, *Airport* centers on a major modern institution that touches on everyone's life but about which the ordinary person knows very little. Here, the author draws on his extensive preparatory research to provide a wealth of clearly presented and accurately-detailed information about most aspects of airport procedures and the handling of planes.

The result is that after completing the book even the most demanding reader feels satisfied about having been given an exhaustive and reliable "behind-the-scenes" look at the workings of a large modern airport. The narrative also features a number of stories about the personal and professional lives of a variety of characters who in one way or another are related to the institution under examination. These plots and subplots arouse uncomplicated feelings of sympathy or condemnation in the reader and, along with this emotional appeal, provide suspense. Finally, the novel touches on some topical concerns, in particular, on air traffic safety and noise pollution. For his treatment of such issues Hailey has sometimes been praised as a social critic but, in truth, his criticism of the status quo is never severe. In *Airport*, for example, the leader of a demonstration against noise pollution is revealed to be acting largely out of self-interest and it is suggested that he and his companions would do better to agitate for increased investment in enlarging and improving the airport.



Techniques

In terms of technique, *Airport* conforms to the pattern devised by Hailey early in his career to create novels that, although slick and predictable, at their best are well-packaged, fast-paced and readable. Narrated episodically, the action covers the short period of a grave crisis that serves two thematic purposes. It threatens to upset the functioning of the institution and therefore offers the occasion for a close look at the institution itself. It generates the tension that brings the characters' intimate problems to a turning point, giving them the opportunity to reveal their heroic or villainous qualities. As a matter of fact, in the course of a single night, everything seems to go wrong. To cite just the main events, there is a terrible blizzard and snow blocks a badly-needed runway; a tremendous in-flight emergency ensues after Guerrero's bomb blows a hole in Demerest's plane, in the process disfiguring Gwen; Mel Bakersfeld's wife announces that she wants a divorce just as he is being approached by a group of demonstrators protesting plans to build a new runway in the direction of their community. Episodes relating to these multiple institutional and personal crises alternate with chapters which present discussions or debates about the workings of the airport, so that the suspenseful stories and the didactic material unfold simultaneously.

Adaptations

The motion picture version of *Airport* was written and directed by George Seaton and produced by Ross Hunter for Universal Pictures in 1970.

The film, which retains most of the characters and situations of the novel, has an all-star cast headed by Burt Lancaster as Mel Bakersfeld and Dean Martin as Vernon Demerest. Although reviewers were lukewarm in their assessments, it was a box-office smash and, predictably, had several equally successful sequels.



Key Questions

Hailey has been one of the pioneers of the contemporary "crisis" novel. In addition to relying on the thrill of danger to capture an audience, the disaster novel genre has focused attention on institutions that affect the lives of many people, such as hotels and airports. For the sake of good fiction, and perhaps as part of his views of modern society, Hailey has been critical of the incompetence of the people and bureaucracies that run the institution. Some people argue that writers like Hailey have unfairly portrayed these institutions, and in doing so have stymied their effectiveness; other people think the criticism is timely and well deserved. To what extent are novelists justified in taking liberties with facts to suit their story? After all, everyone knows it's only fiction.

1. What techniques does Hailey use to capture the excitement and intensity of life in a big city airport?
2. In what ways do Vernon Demerest and Mel Bakersfeld complement each other as leaders and heroes?
3. What subplots provide the "melodrama" in this novel?
4. Is it possible to reconcile technological progress and a concern for ecology? What seems to be Hailey's position in relation to this dilemma?
5. Airport was made into an enormously successful motion picture.

Comment on the "cinematic" techniques of the narrative.

Literary Precedents

Airport has some characteristics in common with the early twentieth-century muckraking tradition of writers like George Lippard and Upton Sinclair whose semifictional books disclosed what industries or institutions were "really like." Hailey, however, does not probe as deeply or widely in his social analysis. His novel also has something in common with a long tradition of essentially melodramatic novels by writers of superior talent like Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Finally, for its "inside look" at social and historical phenomena presented according to the dictates of melodrama, this book can be related to the fiction of such contemporaries as Irving Wallace, Allen Drury, and Harold Robbins.



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