

A Bell for Adano Short Guide

A Bell for Adano by John Hersey

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Characters

Major Joppolo represents the better characteristics of Americans. He is genuinely concerned for the people of Adano and wants to establish a democratic way of life in this seaport town which he rules as a military governor.

He is not skilled in protecting himself from his superiors, and is too singleminded in the pursuit of his aims.

Thanks to his lack of any sense of self preservation, his tenure in office is too brief to really accomplish any effective change in the way of life in Adano.

General Marvin is a thinly disguised version of General George S. Patton, whose flamboyant exploits were becoming well publicized before the end of 1944. Patton is reported to have had a peasant's cart removed from the road and the man's mule shot; Marvin is guilty of the same act. Marvin struts and roars and does little else in this characterization. He orders that no carts shall enter Adano, not taking the trouble to learn that these carts are necessary because they bring in the town's supply of food and water. Patton was much more complex than this caricature of him suggests, but none of the characters in the novel are portrayed in depth.

The citizens of Adano tend to be somewhat comic as Hersey sees them.

"Two Hands" Gargano, the police chief, has won his nickname because of his wild gestures. Tomasino, the town's leading fisherman, is an anarchist who hates all authority. Lazy Fata lives up to his name. Most of these people have a dominant trait and behave accordingly. Tomasino's daughter, Tina, is more individualized. She has dyed her hair blond as a protest against the boring life she leads in Adano. She and Joppolo have a sort of platonic romance, an incident which caused the real major on whom Joppolo is based to threaten Hersey with a law suit after the novel's publication. The matter was settled amicably over a dinner.



Social Concerns

The effects of war on those who fight and on civilian populations as well was a concern of Hersey's from the beginning of his career. In *Men of Bataan* (1942) and *Into the Valley* (1943) his compassion for the American serviceman was obvious. In *A Bell for Adano* he shows the effects of an invasion on the peasant population of Sicily. Sicily had seen a number of invasions, but these invaders were American and British, quite different from those of the past who had come from other parts of the Mediterranean. They were decidedly different too from the German armies which had occupied the island and with whom the Italians had an uneasy alliance. Since 1922, Sicilian peasants had lived under a fascist dictatorship.

For them the fascist salute had become a reflex action when dealing with any authority. Sicily had never known the American style of democracy. Bribes to public officials were a way of life, hated but accepted since business had never been conducted in any other way.

The Italian army did not fight well in World War II. For the second time in the century Italians had been forced into a war for which they were neither prepared psychologically nor militarily. Their soldiers were ashamed of their record, but the war for these men was over, and Hersey says, "The war aim for most men is to go home."

Chapter 31 shows the reactions of returning prisoners of war and the women who are waiting for them.

Hersey captures the joy of reunions well, and equally well the anguish of those women who will have no reunions. A young man, Nicolò, explains that few of the Italian soldiers were fascists, and they simply could not identify themselves with Mussolini and the group he led.



Techniques

Hersey claimed that he wrote *A Bell for Adano* in three weeks after going to Sicily with the American army and watching military governors coping with the problems presented by their new areas of authority. This accounts in part for the thin elements in the book. But Hersey was convinced then and throughout his life that writing should serve a moral purpose, and most of his subsequent novels present conflicts of good and evil.

A Bell for Adano is episodic in structure. As Major Joppolo meets the people he governs, the episodes are the natural results of their interactions.

The forces that put an abrupt end to Joppolo's governorship are set up early in the novel. He countermands General Marvin's order that no carts will enter Adano. One of his subordinates, Captain Purvis, reports Joppolo's action to protect himself, but the report is deliberately sidetracked by other members of the staff, even sent back to North Africa at one point. Eventually, as the reader knows it must, the report catches up with Marvin, who orders the Major's removal. Before this happens, Joppolo has become a hero to the town's people, and Hersey has presented both them and him as warm characters.

Hersey based the novel on his original dispatches, adding to them the characterization of General Marvin and his other fictional touches. Most of his books are factual, drawing upon his own observations or careful research.

Themes

Two cultures confront one another in this book; an ancient one, that of Sicily, whose people are very poor and who have lived for centuries under the domination of local landlords, and the American army of occupation from a wealthy country with a tradition of democracy. The Americans would be there a few years only. They might try to help the people, but after their brief occupation old patterns would soon reestablish themselves, including the dominance of the Mafia which Mussolini had suppressed during his dictatorship.

As Hersey states in the preface to the novel, Major Victor Joppolo is a good man. The son of Italian immigrants to the United States, he soon realizes how much better off his family is, when compared with the people under his jurisdiction, (although hardly the rich Americans so many Sicilians believe their latest invaders to be).

Hersey addresses the overwhelming difficulties facing a morally good man who tries to govern in a country where political leaders were never noted for such qualities as the term "good man" implies. General Marvin, on the other hand, is called an evil man. He is indifferent to the people in the path of his army, considering them as nuisances which might slow down his progress.

On one level the novel is a morality drama in which good and evil clash, and good is defeated. A morality drama of this sort inevitably produces an oversimplification of both the characters and of the situations in which they are involved.

Adaptations

A Bell for Adano was dramatized and became relatively successful as a Broadway play. In August 1945, Twentieth Century Fox released a film version. It is usually described as one of the better films for that year, as well as one of director Henry King's more sensitive accomplishments. The scenes depicting the replacement of Adano's town bell and of the return of its prisoners of war are very effective. The town's bell had been melted down by the military for bullets, and Joppolo commandeered one from an American warship to replace it, thus helping to restore the pride of the citizens of Adano in their town. King included newsreels to heighten the realism of his film. John Hodiak played Major Joppolo, and William Bendix his sergeant.

Both were familiar to moviegoers from other war movies they had made. Gene Tierney played Tina.

Movie critics have often said that this film has not been given as much praise as it deserves. It has received some negative criticism, however. For example, Eric Rhode in his *A History of the Cinema from Its Origins to 1970* accuses it of sharing the "sentimental cheeriness" of *Going My Way* in its treatment of GI's in Italy.

Key Questions

A Bell for Adano is a book written by a young war correspondent who has proven himself as a reporter and now wishes to extend his range by becoming a novelist. A group discussion might examine the question: Which voice is dominant here, the voice of a writer accustomed to producing the latest information on a war still in progress, or that of a more reflective writer trying to see how soldiers and civilians in the wake of the campaign in Sicily have been affected by recent events? How evident to the practiced reader is the haste with which the book was written? Hersey's eyes, ears, and voice have already been developed by his experiences in China (1939), and in the Solomons, where he covered the opening battles of the Pacific War.

How well has he understood the people he met in Sicily? He has had only a brief acquaintance with the island.

A Bell for Adano and the Pulitzer Prize he won for it remained among Hersey's claims to fame long after he had written many other books. Many critics believe *Hiroshima* (1946) to be his best book: What qualities do these books share? What is memorable about this first novel forty-one years after the events it describes are no longer of topical interest?

1. What is Sergeant Borth's role in the novel? Is he an effective contrast to Major Joppolo?

2. In his "Forward" Hersey identifies Major Victor Joppolo as a good man, one we are asked to admire. In Chapter 6, he calls General Marvin "a bad man, something worse than what our troops were trying to throw out."

Is this justification for the critic Daine Trilling's charge that *A Bell for Adano* is oversimplified in its characterizations?

3. General George S. Patton was a controversial figure during the early phases of the invasion of Europe. After he had slapped two soldiers suffering from combat fatigue, many American civilians were clamoring for his dismissal. He would later prove himself to be probably the most effective American tank commander. How accurate is the description Hersey gives of him?

4. Some readers in the group may have had the opportunity to see Italian street life at first hand. Are the people in the streets of Adano fairly typical?

Does Hersey have accurate eyes and ears for such scenes?

5. The people of Adano were quick to point out that their eight-hundred-year-old bell was older than the country Major Joppolo represents. Why is the restoration of the bell so important?



6. To what extent is the novel a comedy? Is the battle of police chief "Two Hands" and Errante effective as humor?

7. Which episodes are most memorable in this book, those in which we see the relationship of the people of Adano with one another, or those which feature Joppolo?

8. Critics of the book said that the American soldiers were too idealized.

Does the character of Captain Purvis contradict this charge?

9. Chapter 31 describes the return of former prisoners of war. Traditionally, although Italy was officially united in the nineteenth century, the people of the southern part of the country including Sicily remained suspicious of the north and their rulers in Rome.

How do the returning soldiers feel about the fascist regime? About Mussolini in particular?

10. Was there anything in the romance of Major Joppolo and Tina to justify the anger of the real former Military Governor of Licato, the real Adano?

11. Is Hersey right when he says of Major Joppolo: ". . . what he did and what he was not able to do in Adano represented in miniature what America can and cannot do in Europe"? Was Hersey a perceptive prophet?

Literary Precedents

A Bell for Adano is a first novel by a reporter and is as much a documentary account as it is a piece of fiction. Hersey the reporter received more praise than Hersey the novelist. Readers today would find the American soldier as he appeared in the dispatches of correspondents during World War II too idealized. Most of these accounts stressed the bravery of the GI in battle.

The correspondents also tried to assure the families of American soldiers that their sons and fathers were living up to their expectations when not fighting.

These descriptions filled the requirements of wartime propaganda. Richard Tregaski's *Quada canal Diary* (1943), the dispatches of Ernie Pyle (who of all correspondents probably knew the GI's best), and Hersey's own reporting closely follow this pattern. Hersey had, after all, in his *Men of Bataan* presented a number of idealized portraits of American soldiers, including one of General MacArthur.

American soldiers were also praised in these reports for their relationships with the peoples whose countries they had entered. James Norman Hall's *Lost Island* (1943) describes the destruction of a people's way of life after an American air base is built on their island.

Generally, however, the tone of wartime books was positive, stressing the benefits Americans were bestowing on war-torn or backward areas.



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