

# Black Sunday Short Guide

## Black Sunday by Thomas Harris

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# Characters

Michael Lander is the novel's most interesting — and most tragic — character. A man stripped of most of the things that have given his life meaning, he has the job of piloting the blimp that provides aerial television shots of athletic events. This job prompts his contact with Black September. We see him proceeding inexorably toward his own destruction, since he has planned not only the deaths of everyone inside the stadium but also his own death.

Dahlia Ayad commands less sympathy. Lander's contact with the terrorists, she has gained considerable control over him and must maintain that control or kill him, yet within the constraints of that twisted relationship she takes good care of Lander; her success depends on keeping his physical and psychological well-being from deteriorating further.

Kabakov is the novel's nominal hero, although his acts differ little from the terrorists he opposes. The main distinction is that his cruelty is directed in a cause that many consider desirable, yet from the beginning of the book, when he and his team of elite commandos carry out a nighttime raid into Lebanon that results in the violent deaths of a number of terrorist leaders, we see that Kabakov and Moshevsky are killers just like the killers they stalk.



## Social Concerns

In *Black Sunday*, Harris plays on one of the great fears of the contemporary world, terrorism. Members of the Arab terrorist group Black September (the group actually responsible for the atrocities at the Munich Olympics in 1972), with the aid of a pilot who was a P.O.W. during the Vietnam War, plan to fly a blimp into the stadium where the Super Bowl is being played and detonate an explosive charge, sending deadly shrapnel into tens of thousands of spectators, including the President of the United States. Part of the appeal of the novel is the chilling knowledge that terrorist groups do exist and that such an attack, while seemingly farfetched, is proven to be possible by the detailed explanations Harris provides about how such an act could take place. Harris also includes information about Israeli counter-terrorist efforts, modern weaponry, and explosives, and smuggling to form an authentic background for his tale.

This first novel also illustrates a characteristic concern of Harris's fiction, a concern for the psychology — or psychopathology — of his characters.

Former P.O.W. Michael Lander is given believable reasons for wanting to assist Dahlia Ayad and Muhammad Fasil in attacking the Super Bowl. A record of childhood inadequacy, torture and deprivation in the North Vietnamese P.O.W. camp, his forced resignation from the armed forces for suspicion of complicity with the enemy, and his wife's unfaithfulness have carried him past the point of despair. Harris demonstrates great sympathy for both heroes and villains in his work, and the implication here as elsewhere in his canon is that what separates the two may be simply past events.

## Techniques

Black Sunday is a novel which incorporates elements of many genres, among them the police procedural mystery, the suspense thriller, and the espionage novel. In their hunting of the terrorists, Harris's pursuers follow clues which ultimately lead them to the Super Bowl, while the way Harris cuts back and forth between his various settings in the Middle East and the United States builds suspense as the two sets of characters draw closer and closer until at last they face each other at the book's climax.

Harris employs an omniscient narrator who knows all the events, thoughts, and feelings related in the novel. Harris skillfully allows us entry into the minds of a number of characters, as well as occasional flashbacks to further illuminate their lives. This gives us great psychological insight and helps explain the motivation of even the most evil characters in the novel.

# Themes

Black Sunday presents a classic goodversus-evil battle in which the lines between them, while blurred, are still recognizable. While Lander and Ayad may occasionally command our sympathy, the act they contemplate is a heinous murder of thousands of innocents, and the novel's protagonists, Major David Kabakov and Sgt. Robert Moshevsky of the Mossad (the Israeli secret service) and Sam Corley of the FBI, engage our interest throughout.

Within the confines of the battle, however, Harris suggests the complexity of the issue of terrorism. Kabakov kills and tortures in order to try to save lives, while Ayad and many other Arabs depicted in the book have never known anything other than deprivation, hardship, and warfare. Their only hope of regaining their homeland is violence committed in secret, since they cannot defeat the Israelis in open combat. Harris places us in the strange position of rooting for both pursued and pursuer, of seeing both sides of the issue before ultimately coming down on the side of good.

# Adaptations

John Frankenheimer directed a popular film version of *Black Sunday* which appeared in theaters in 1977. Reviewers applauded the way the film played off the worst fears of theatergoers to provide a chilling and exciting cinematic experience as well as the rich performance of Bruce Dern as Lander. While some settings were changed to make the film more closely match current events, the film follows Harris's novel closely in matters of plot, theme, and character.



## Key Questions

In general, Harris's fiction is marked by psychological insight, an attention to detail which provides a sense of authenticity, and an ability to pull his villains from the ranks of those who most frighten us. Discussion of any of his works might consider his penchant for humanizing the inhuman, for suggesting the depths of good and evil in each of us, and for arguing that although good may triumph over evil it often does so only at great cost.

1. Harris provides extensive backgrounds and extenuating circumstances for his villains. Does this cause you to regard them differently, or is it difficult for you to feel sorry for them?
2. Does *Black Sunday* illuminate the conflict between Arabs and Israelis in any way or does it simply use this conflict as a backdrop?
3. As the Vietnam War becomes more remote in time, it becomes more difficult for people to remember the great tension it engendered in our own country. How does Harris suggest the extent of this conflict and its continuing role in American society?
4. Some people, citing examples of people who have copied behavior in the popular media, might suggest that describing a terrorist attack in such detail might spawn copy-cat behavior.

What responsibilities, if any, does an artist bear to society in these matters?

5. The Super Bowl is chosen as a target for a number of reasons. What makes it such a valuable terrorist target from both practical and symbolic standpoints?
6. In what ways does the film version of *Black Sunday* seem to you to be superior to the novel? In what ways inferior?
7. Harris describes two heterosexual couples in *Black Sunday*, Ayad and Lander and Kabakov and Rachel. How would you analyze these two relationships? How would you compare them?
8. Kabakov and Moshevsky are depicted as characters willing to do anything to complete their mission. In what ways are they different from the villains they pursue? How do you feel about their methods?
9. In the wake of recent terrorist attacks in the U.S. and around the world, what do you think Harris's novel tells us about the inevitability of terrorism? Can it be prevented?
10. In what ways can Michael Lander's story be read as a tragedy?



## Literary Precedents

Black Sunday represents a thriller in which a hero or heroes battles a villain or villains to save the lives of innocents. In its simplest manifestation, it is the story of psychopathic killers stalking innocent victims, the stuff of many of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, detective novels, and true crime tales.

Its discussion of the technical paraphernalia of international terrorism, meanwhile — plastic explosives, weaponry, and various exotic means of transport — allies this book with the genre of techno-thrillers by writers such as Tom Clancy. Although Harris's next two novels also depend on authentic details, his movement in those works away from international criminal acts to homegrown psychopaths means that this book remains his most political, as well as his most reliant on technology.

In direct opposition to the novel's use of the detective genre, the horrifying subject matter represents the horror genre, which repulses us instead of encouraging us to draw nearer to a solution. This tension, described by Terrence Rafferty in his review of the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, operates in each of Harris's last two novels.

## Related Titles

Black Sunday provides an easily-digested entry to the world of Thomas Harris. While not as literary as *Red Dragon* (1981) or *The Silence of the Lambs* (1987), this novel shows Harris's skill with character psychology, introduces us to the narrative form which he has to date found most congenial, an omniscient narrator who can jump from mind to mind in the course of telling the story, and demonstrates his ability to weave a story that can keep a reader riveted.



# Copyright Information

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