Blood Tie Short Guide

Blood Tie by Mary Lee Settle

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Contents

Characters

Settle's greatest achievement in Blood Tie is her characterization. The characters are authentic and memorable, including the minor characters such as old Attila the donkey driver, who wears a faded Harvard sweatshirt and whose right hand was cut off for smuggling. Settle is as good with the Turkish characters as with the Americans, perhaps better. With the Turkish characters, comes the sense of going inside a foreign culture. With the American and European characters, the reader gets a similar feel for the close-knit expatriate circle.

Even the characters who seem stereotypical have unique features. The old agha resembles a movie Mafia godfather, but he has a definite Turkish accent, worrying about his lemons instead of his tomatoes. Frank Proctor, the local CIA man, obviously works for the company: He is a "team player" who does not question his superior or policy even when they are wrong. But his motives are carefully probed, showing the roots of "bossism" in his paternalistic belief that he is doing good for the Turks (besides, of course, for America).

There is no single protagonist in the novel. The characters who come closest are Ariadne, a divorced middle-aged American who mothers the young people, and one of her charges, the mute Turkish boy Kemal. The goodhearted Ariadne, at home in the Turkish setting and accepted by the Turks, is forced to leave the country for being too friendly with suspected dissidents.

Kemal, younger brother of the slain dissident, has risked his life repeatedly to hide and feed his brother. When he loses both his brother and Ariadne, he is so grief-stricken that he breaks out of his muteness. On the book's last page, he stands on the mountainside above the town and screams out "HELE HELE!" — meaning "Tell me the truth!"

Social Concerns

Reviewers admired the convincing way Settle portrayed Turkish characters and society in Blood Tie, which is set mostly in and around Ceramos, a fictional small town on the southwest coast of Turkey. Settle lived in the area for a couple of years, but in addition she found plenty of parallels in Turkish society to Appalachian coal towns and even to the seventeenth-century British society in Prisons (1973), which she had just finished writing before Blood Tie. The main social concern in Blood Tie, as elsewhere in Settle's work, is the domination of society by bosses, whether they are called landowners, mine operators, padrones, or aghas (as in Turkey), and the consequent stifling of democracy.

Ceramos is dominated by Duriist Osman, the old agha, and his corrupt son Huseyin. They are the local landowning aristocracy, but here, as in Settle's other books, the aristocrats have grimy and disreputable origins.

The high and mighty agha began his career as an ibne, the kept boy of a homosexual German military attache.

Trying to forget his days as a powerless orphan, the agha now exercises power ruthlessly. Nor is the agha's power merely local. He can also reach into the national government and influence its decisions, suggesting that the real national government is a network of good old aghas, despite the democracy supposedly installed by Ataturk.

The entrenched agha system seems an unhappy legacy of a country where, as one character jokes, two of the national heroes are Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan (the Turks are descendants of historic marauders from the central Asian steppes).

In Blood Tie, the boss system has an international dimension, naturally involving Americans, who have replaced the Germans. The CIA works hand in iron glove with the aghas and the nominal authorities to control development and dissidents, and to keep the coast safe for NATO. A circle of expatriate Americans also associates socially with the local power elite; in fact, one rich American girl is sleeping with the agha's son. Blood Tie seems to warn that, with their wealth and power, Americans are in danger of becoming the biggest bosses of the world.

Techniques

The fine characterization in Blood Tie is related to Settle's main narrative technique, a shifting third-person point of view. The point of view allows for detailed exploration of each character, including the character's past. Then the point of view shifts every few pages, resulting in the same treatment of a whole range of characters. How many times Settle returns to the same character depends on how important the character is to the action. The action itself is slow-moving and fragmented, deepening and coming together only through the different points of view.

For readers wanting fast action and immediate explanations, the technique is frustrating, though it does offer some suspense, like the old Victorian novels with several lines of action. The technique is superb, however, for showing multicultural perspectives and the normal little misunderstandings of life — such as Huseyin's notion that the rich American girl is admiring him from a distance, when she is practically blind without her contact lenses. Most of all, the technique places the action in context, mirroring the complex nature of reality. The hidden aspects of reality, its historical and cultural contexts, are symbolized by the undersea landscape containing ruins and by the mountain overlooking Ceramos. The mountain is honeycombed with secret passageways and tombs (maybe the tomb of the mythical Endymion) which only Kemal and his brother know about and to which the rest of Ceramos, except for a young German archaeologist who suspects their existence, is oblivious.

Themes

The title Blood Tie suggests something high-minded like brotherhood, the recognition of common humanity among diverse peoples, or the forming of close relationships. There are examples of all these in Blood Tie, but the title also evokes a more sinister theme — the complicity of bloodshed. In the three instances of death in the novel, numerous people are implicated as partially responsible, some unwittingly or ignorantly. The first instance involves only Turks: One of Huseyin's overloaded passenger boats, habitually ignored by the authorities, swamps and sends several young people to their doom, including Huseyin's fiancee, daughter of a rich Istanbul agha. In the second instance, an American woman who sleeps around with the young Turkish men is caught in the act by her husband, who commits suicide by scuba diving deep into the ocean and then shooting to the surface like a human missile. In the third instance, many people are involved — the same sluttish woman, the CIA, Huseyin, and the local police — in tracking down a young dissident (guilty only of taking part in Istanbul demonstrations), who is beaten to a pulp with a rifle butt.

The three instances show how easy it is to become implicated in bloodshed, and the widening circles of implication ultimately take in even the reader.

Literary Precedents

Perhaps the oldest literary ancestor of Blood Tie is Mark Twain's Innocents Abroad (1869, but over the decades the tone of novels describing American innocents abroad has changed from comic to somber, as American power has grown in the world. Henry James started the trend with his tales of American women who got themselves into trouble in Europe, a kind of story which bred many imitators. In Blood Tie, American women are still getting themselves into trouble in Turkey, and for the most part they are still walking away and letting others pay. Their pattern of individual behavior is atrocious, but when the pattern of behavior is adopted by the CIA, it has the makings of foreign policy disaster, as described in Graham Greene's The Quiet American (1955) and similar works.

Blood Tie has much in common with The Quiet American, except that Ariadne shows that not all Americans abroad are walking disasters.

Blood Tie also has some close Turkish relatives, particularly the early novels of Yashar Kemal describing the behavior of aghas. The best known of these is Memed, My Hawk, now a Turkish classic. Unhappily, the behavior of aghas has not changed at all over the decades.

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