

Bloodline Short Guide

Bloodline by Sidney Sheldon

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Characters

Bloodline was Sheldon's fourth blockbuster novel, and he continued to present the same types of characters which made its predecessors successful. A beautiful heiress, Elizabeth Roffe, is typical of the glamorous and highly intelligent women familiar to his readers. She is modeled on Christina Onassis, and like Miss Onassis, she finds herself the heir to business concerns worth billions after her father's death. Her new position also means that she has become a target for the same killer who murdered her father.

Elizabeth is paired with Rhys Williams, a dark and handsome Welshman from a family of coal miners. From his obscure beginnings, he has risen by his intelligence and force of personality to become chief assistant to the late Sam Roffe, who died just before the novel begins. Rhys, although he is the best man for the position, cannot become president because the top executives must come from the Roffe family. Rhys is very similar to the characters of Larry Douglas in *The Other Side of Midnight* (1973), and Michel Moretti, who heads a Mafia family in *Rage of Angels* (1980), except unlike them is he is a good moral character.

The Roffe cousins, like their real life counterparts, the Rothchilds, occupy high social positions in the leading European capitals. This family's connections extend into America as well; Sam Roffe and his daughter, Elizabeth, are Americans. In addition to Elizabeth, other fourth-generation Roffes include Sir Alec Nichols, baronet, and his wife, Vivian, the English branch; Helene Roffe and her husband, Charles Martel, in France; Anne Roffe and her husband, Walther Gassner, in Germany; and Simonetta Roffe and her husband, Ivo Palazzi, in Italy. In each of these families, one member has a motive for murder. Ivo, supporting a public family, a wife and three girls, also has a concealed family, his mistress Donatella and their three sons. He never has enough money. Sir Alec is in debt to loan sharks. Helene thrives on power and danger. With Elizabeth out of the way, she might head the company. Walther may be a psychopath. If the shares of the company stock are put on the market, their financial problems would be over. The family members have always kept the shares to themselves.

An interesting character, Max Hornung, also keeps the plot moving. He is a mathematical and financial genius who had been an accountant in the *Betrug Abteilung*, the department set up to investigate financial frauds in the Swiss banking system. He is too good at his job and becomes the terror of the financial world. Since Max considers himself a modern-day Sherlock Holmes, he is delighted, and the banking world relieved, when he goes to work for the Zurich police force as a detective. His character is similar to Arthur Conan Doyle's great sleuth in his problem-solving ability. He is a computer whiz who knows all of the computer languages and is more at home with them than people. He is also a comic figure with his puny body, oversized head, and a face "put together by an absent minded prankster."

Given one loose thread of evidence which does not fit into the rest of the fabric, he will in a remarkably short time expose somebody's seemingly foolproof scheme. He is a fantasy figure, who, like Sherlock Homes, is fascinating to watch.

Social Concerns/Themes

Roffe and Sons is a pharmaceutical corporation with laboratories and plants from Greenland to India. Its products include ethical drugs, available only through prescriptions, and propriety items, sold over the counter.

Since the days of its founder, the original Samuel Roffe, serums and later antibiotics have been specialties of the firm. It supplies drugs for the curing of rare diseases to the armed forces and to hospitals as a public service. Again, Sheldon has done his research thoroughly. Because they are in the forefront of the battle against diseases, he felt that pharmaceutical manufacturers were subjects that his readers would want to become more familiar with. He toured a number of plants. "They turned me down in one in New Jersey, but I visited the same pharmaceutical manufacturer in Switzerland."

Wealth and the power it possesses are common themes in Sheldon's books. Wealthy people have a glamour which fascinates many readers. Much of the general public follows the activities of such billionaires as Donald Trump, the late Howard Hughes, and Sam Walton. Sheldon himself, while he came from a family which had neither education nor money, is now wealthy in his own right, and he has a number of wealthy, glamorous people among his friends. Practically any of his books have, in addition to affluent characters, at least one figure who is rising from obscurity into prominence.

Techniques

"I try to construct my novels so that when my readers get to the end of a chapter, they have to read on." Sheldon in an interview with Herbert Mitgang of the New York Times explained his method of avoiding the boredom he believes to be all too characteristic of many books published today. He has developed great skill in writing these final scenes of chapters. The two attempts on Elizabeth's life are placed this way. The reader has to read on to find out how she escaped from the wrecked jeep, and is likely to be horrified as the company elevator crashes to the basement. Was she in it? Max Hornung is called in to investigate this second attempt on her life.

A subplot runs through the novel.

Several murders have been committed by a perverted killer. Each one has as its victim a beautiful blonde, nude and strangled with a red ribbon tied around her neck. What is the connection of these crimes with the attempts on the life of the Roffe heiress, and the violent accidents in Roffe and Son plants, even at the central plant in Zurich? The author is good at spreading suspicion among the Roffe relatives. Evidence is stacked against Ivo, Walther, and finally against Rhys Williams.

Typical of Sheldon's fiction, *Bloodline* has episodes which occur at a number of exotic settings, ranging from Istanbul to Buenos Aires. Sheldon likes to write about rich, lush places, and has visited most of them. For the scene in Buenos Aires, where Helene wins an auto race, he had to do book research because he had never been there.

Adaptations

Bloodline was made into a Paramount motion picture starring Audrey Hepburn, Ben Gazzara, James Maxin, Romy Schneider, and Omar Shariff. It was a dull movie, and its failure at the box office disappointed Sheldon and made him determined that in the future he would personally see that his books were properly filmed. Yet neither *Rage of Angels* nor *Windmills of the Gods*, both of which became movies, were noticeably better.



Key Questions

In *Bloodline*, Sheldon intends primarily to entertain, to help his readers escape to the world of adventure and romance. Typically his characters belong in the upper echelons of their professions and possess fortunes that the average reader can never hope to attain. But Sheldon in presenting these people is very careful in placing them in their correct settings. It might also be reasonably said that he is more skillful at establishing the factual basis for his stories than he is creating believable human beings. Is he a better social historian than a writer of fiction?

A best seller often gives expression to the dreams of the reading public, which eagerly devours its contents. To what extent does Sheldon accomplish this?

Whatever the reader might think of Sheldon as a writer, there can be little question about his intelligence as a producer of best sellers. He has carefully analyzed the market and knows precisely what his public wants. Writers who are less successful financially might even envy this sure grasp of what it takes to make books appear regularly on best seller lists.

1. The world of business is a mysterious one to most readers. Around the turn of the century, and in the decade following, writers such as Theodore Dreiser were analyzing that world.

Sheldon's books involve the lives of late twentieth-century entrepreneurs.

How accurately does he present them?

2. If Elizabeth Roffe is based on Christina Onassis, to what extent is she an authentic portrait of the Onassis heiress?

3. The continued fascination which Jack the Ripper has for people in our time attests to an interest in pathological crimes shared, perhaps, by most people. Sheldon counts on this in many of his novels. How effective is his use of the murders in *Bloodline*?

4. Rhys Williams is described as dark, handsome, and Welsh. Has Sheldon developed his character beyond these stereotypical traits?

5. If Sheldon were presenting the pharmaceutical industry today, would his presentation of it be different?

What problems face those concerned with world health today that were unknown in 1978?

6. Max Hornung prides himself on being a latter-day Sherlock Holmes.

How does he compare to his Victorian predecessor?



7. The Rothchild family is the prototype for the Roffes. How well do Elizabeth's relatives measure up to that family of international financiers?
8. Has Sheldon given any hints that Sir Alec Nicholas is the psychopathic killer who has Elizabeth on his list of future victims? Is his reputation as a master of the unexpected ending deserved?
9. How effective is Sheldon as a writer of romance? Does the love affair between Elizabeth Roffe and Rhys Williams retain its interest throughout the novel?
10. Defend Sheldon against this review of *Bloodline*: "All the characters are stupid and clumsy. There is business trouble, sabotage and murder, but the writing is a long string of perfectly matched cliches, and it goes on forever." (H. C. Veit. *Library Journal* [March 1, 1978]: 590.)

Literary Precedents

If Sheldon is right when he calls himself "the village story teller," he belongs in the oldest tradition of fiction, the oral spinner of tales. His prose indeed sounds like somebody talking. This quality persists even after the dictated material of his original manuscripts has undergone as many as twelve revisions.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994