Cannibals and Missionaries Short Guide

Cannibals and Missionaries by Mary McCarthy

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Characters

The cannibals are the art collectors riding first class to an archaeological dig in Teheran. As a group they represent the values of art over life, and yet they show the limits of this view, since art has not improved or enlightened them. They know much but understand little; their interest is not in the art itself but the "collecting," with value placed not upon aesthetics but upon dollars. Replaced by their artifacts in the trade, they have subsumed life to "things."

More real, because more human, are the Missionaries — the members of a fact-finding committee investigating prison conditions in Iran. Humanists all, they value people over things and become the principal narrators: the two churchmen, the two academics as McCarthy had drawn in earlier novels, a female college President with her "screech" and a tweedy male "specialist," the two politicians, one Dutch and the other a typical American liberal reminiscent of Eugene McCarthy, and a scruffy CIA agent with a cat. The two groups are connected by Charles, a declasse type traveling with the collectors and commented on by Sophie the journalist. Unlike the collectors, the committee extends and elevates its humanity by forming bonds not only with the collectors, but with Ahmed the terrorist, and with their own shortcomings and foibles as well. The fact that the rich collectors all go home while the committee stays until the climax does not, as some commentators claim, show that McCarthy values art over life, but simply reflects the fact that they, valuing life but also entertaining their personal idols, represent mankind.

The terrorists are a motley crew of Arabs, Dutch Baader-Meinhof types, and one last Tupamaro who remind the others of characters in Dostoevsky novels. Jeroen, the leader, represents the politically committed who replace both life and art with ideology, creating a new configuration which he also destroys when The Girl, an art treasure which captures a moment in life, captures him.

Social Concerns/Themes

Like The Group (1963), Cannibals and Missionaries is concerned with confusion about values and with the difficulty of generating manners and standards of conduct which live up to ideology. The milieu, urban terrorism, conflicting ideologies, and great gaps not only between haves and have-nots but between priorities and values, create a condition of instability and isolation which requires some form of balancing. A rational sense of the self and one's relationship to others and to "things" must temper the increasing irrationality of contemporary life, reflected in the novel as Jeroen, the terrorist leader — devoted to the leveling of "things" and the elevation of people — destroys his comrades and the paintings as well in an explosive suicide pact with Vermeer's Girl with which he has fallen in love.

A preoccupation with the terrorist threat to "civilized values" has been a benchmark of 1970s and 1980s culture, highlighted uncannily by the Iranian hostage crisis in late 1979; Cannibals and Missionaries is about a plane-load of art collectors and liberal committee members en route to pre-Khomeini Teheran. The Palestinian question, state terror (as in the Shah's Iran, which the committee was headed to investigate) versus stateless terrorist groups, and the role of neutral countries and the media itself in aiding or counteracting terrorists, all arise. The psychology of the captive, especially his desire to understand and sometimes even join with the captor, was a media issue in the Patty Hearst case.

For individuals, it is important to maintain one's dignity and pride, the "warrior values," in the face of threats.

This need is reflected in the dominant motif of the book, the contradiction between art and life, paintings held for ransom and people used to bargain for them. The relationship of ritual and form ("art") to feeling and invention ("life") as means of survival is explored. Art, of course, always is based on life, and life itself contains artistic form and pattern. The idea for the novel, McCarthy says in her "Acknowledgements," came from her lecture "Art Values and the Value of Art."

Perhaps the most overriding of McCarthy's themes is the notion of idols — idols of the mind, fetishes which keep people from balancing their perceptions and attachments. When Helen refuses to give up her Vermeer, clergyman Frank admonishes her against creating false gods to worship, but the committee members have their own idols, democracy and human dignity, and the terrorists theirs. Sophie notes in her journal: "A. keeps calling the kapers [terrorists] fanatics; look at 'Chaddie,'. . . Frank is a fanatic on keeping an open mind." Idols (and ideals), however, are not only ubiquitous but also necessary for human aspiration and civilization.

Techniques

McCarthy's subject and setting rely on the techniques of investigative journalism — realistic portraits of the Dutch country and people, detailed study of agendas, hardware, and jargon used by both terrorists and governments, as well as extended didactic discourse on a wealth of unrelated topics — roses, ethics, ecclesiastical and secular politics, even detailed drawings of solutions to the Cannibals and Missionaries game which gives the book its title.

The suspense thriller builds its appeal upon the expectation of violence and terror, as McCarthy's hostages and their captors await the shipments of paintings and the crisis in their own confrontation in their farmhouse hideout on a remote Dutch polder, the perfect setting of bourgeois tranquility in a country known for its neutrality and reasonableness. The expected blood and gore, however, does not appear in McCarthy, since the only victim of other than verbal violence is a cat, and even the explosion at the end is an ironic accident.

As in The Group (please see separate entry), the narrative structure of Cannibals and Missionaries depends upon the interrelated dialogues and monologues in which the different characters display their divergent perspectives and personalities. Suspense is also generated by the expectation of conflict not only between terrorist and hostage, but between terrorist and terrorist, hostage and hostage, as different agendas arise (How important is the demand that Israel release Palestinian prisoners?

Why do the art collectors in first class get their drinks before the liberals in Economy?). In this conflict civilized facades wear away, people's "true selves" show, and the importance of form — pressed clothes, a quiet voice — becomes apparent to all, a motif which is compared in the novel to that of Sartre's No Exit (play; 1944).

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