

Celebration Short Guide

Celebration by Mary Lee Settle

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Characters

By chance, a group of such scarred, sensitive people come together in London, where they party and commiserate with each other. The main characters are Teresa Cerrutti, a thirty-yearold American anthropologist recovering from the death of her husband (an archaeologist bitten by poisonous snakes) and a successful operation for uterine cancer; Ewen McLeod, a Scots Highlander recovering from malaria and a bloody romp through eastern Africa with his gun-running Uncle Gordie; Noel Atherton, an English homosexual recovering from a disastrous affair with a Chinese lover in Hong Kong; and Father Pius Deng, a six-foot-nine Jesuit priest whose Dinka family and village in Africa were wiped out by warfare. There are also numerous minor characters, including a younger Frank Proctor (a prominent CIA agent in *Blood Tie*), who earns his CIA credentials here by listening through the wall for Teresa and Ewen to make love.

Unhappily there is not much to hear; Teresa and Ewen are too physically debilitated to consummate their love until months after they move in together. This dispiriting note seems, no doubt unintentionally, to set the tone for the entire novel. Although the disparate cast of characters sounds exotic and exciting, the characters do not live up to their billing. They are something of a bore: their stories are too broken up, their passions too enfeebled, and their personalities too unconvincing.

The most sympathetic character is Father Pius Deng, who is gratuitously killed off at the end by a group of London punks. Apparently his death is meant to enforce the novel's theme, to provide a kind of tough final exam for the celebratory spirit.



Social Concerns/Themes

Although international in scope, the social concerns in *Celebration* are more or less incidental to the novel's main theme. These social concerns center on the encroachment of the modern world on traditional ways of life in Turkey and Africa, as when the isolated village of the Yezidi, a Kurdish tribe in eastern Turkey, is razed to make room for a highway. Similar depredations occur or can be observed as a group of gun-running mercenaries travel through eastern Africa on their way to deliver a load of goods to Sudanese rebels. To an alarming degree, the favored means of introducing traditional peoples to "civilization" seems to be modern warfare.

The novel's main characters are sophisticated refugees of these cultural clashes, people who have lived through awful events, who have experienced the death of loved ones or other terrible losses. They themselves have had close brushes with death; although scarred by their experiences, they are far from lost souls, and one theme of the novel is that such people have developed a heightened awareness and sensitivity to life. They have, as the novel's epigraph states it, crossed over the river Styx and their eyes have been opened. Hence they celebrate life even amid its shambles.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

One reason this ambitious novel does not quite succeed could be Settle's choice of the point of view. In order to bring together all the loose strands and provide a unifying focus, Settle centers the novel on Teresa, whose point of view predominates. The other characters have to tell their stories to and through her, usually bit by bit as they get to know her or overcome their initial reluctance. Their stories are thus distanced, and the effect of the novel is an overabundance of talk. Worse, the stories are filtered through the sensibility of Teresa, who seems to possess no special talent for being a confidante except good hearing and confusion about her own life (she has been seeing an ineffectual therapist, Dr. Dangle).

Presumably Teresa clarifies things for herself in the novel, but nevertheless, instead of offering wisdom, her point of view seems self-indulgent, overly dramatic, and banal. In the novel's own terms, if she has crossed the river Styx, where are the results? The same might be said for the novel's whole collection of confused misfits, except for Father Pius Deng, who spreads some soothing balm and seems the only real candidate for the novel's center.

Settle's use of a distancing point of view and central intelligence recalls the work of Joseph Conrad, particularly Conrad's character/narrator Marlow.

Marlow plays a prominent role in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (from which Father Deng learns his English) and narrates numerous other works, sometimes tediously. In addition, some of Conrad's characters are known to cross the Styx, though doing so does not necessarily qualify them to become members of an exclusive London social club. Settle's idea about those who have crossed the Styx recalls F. Scott Fitzgerald's idea about the rich, and Ernest Hemingway's idea about bullfighters: they are different people from the rest.

Related Titles

Celebration bears some likeness to Settle's *Blood Tie*: both novels have a foreign setting, involve a diverse set of characters, and feature experimentation with point of view. But in *Celebration* the experimentation does not work as well, and a comparison with the earlier novel provides some evidence of how far and perhaps why Settle fell short.

Yet in both cases (as in the case of her monumental *Beulah Quintet*) Settle's ambitions were undeniably grand.



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