

The Drifters Short Guide

The Drifters by James A. Michener

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Characters

Michener compares his young characters in *The Drifters* to Crusaders on a kind of quest or romance in search of new values as they travel through Europe and Africa. In keeping with this medieval motif of the romance, Michener introduces his major characters as though they were figures in an allegory, with each one personifying a prominent social cause.

The concerns espoused by the characters were all heated issues in the 1960s, but Michener develops the characters in such a way that their issues seem eternal as well as temporal. By devoting a single chapter to the introduction of each of seven major characters, who eventually meet and travel together, Michener reinforces the allegorical quality of each character.

Joe offers the reader a glimpse of life at a public university in California during the Vietnam War. Joe abandons his studies in order to avoid the military draft. As he travels abroad he discovers a worthy cause for which he would like to become an activist: soil and water conservation. In Morocco Joe observes how rich agricultural land has become a desert because of poor management. The wildlife refuge in Mozambique also makes a strong impression on Joe, a character who personifies the ecological movement of the 1960s.

Britta is a Norwegian girl who represents the boredom of modern life. In her ennui, Britta fears duplicating the life of her father, who always dreamed of traveling to exotic Ceylon but never realized his dream in spite of having proved himself capable of heroic action in fighting against the Germans during World War II. Britta grows tired of her monotonous routine in Norway, which suggests that peace and democracy can have a narcotic effect on people unless the citizens seek to realize themselves as individuals. Britta goes to Spain in search of excitement, and she is linked romantically first with Joe and then with Harvey Holt, the older engineer who joins the younger characters.

Monica is the daughter of an aristocratic British couple in Vwarda, a fictional republic created by Michener to resemble the countries in Africa that were switching from white colonial rule to black majority rule during the 1960s. Monica represents the way in which rebellion against traditional values can be self-destructive if not guided by a positive motive. Monica rejects her parents only to experiment with LSD and heroin; consequently, she is the focus of Michener's portrayal of the drug culture of the 1960s.

Cato is the black character from Philadelphia through whom Michener presents a view of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. In Mozambique and Morocco, Cato discovers Islam and becomes a reminder of America's many blacks who have become Muslims because Christianity encourages passivity in the face of repression.

Gretchen is a Radcliffe student who helps draft dodgers escape to Canada and who participates in other protests against the Vietnam War. Emotionally scarred by police brutality during one such protest, she goes to Europe to recover and to study. Gretchen



has the greatest sense of history of the characters. While she and the others seem like typical children of the 1960s, it is Gretchen who sees the similarities between America's social upheaval of their day and the medieval French Peasants' Rebellion. She sings popular Scottish and English ballads, and Michener suggests that the protest music of the Vietnam War is a continuation of the ballad tradition. By the end of *The Drifters* Gretchen is so convinced of the similarity between her generation and the Children's Crusade that she plans to write her own book.

Yigal is a hero of Israel's Six-Day War in 1967. While his youthful military exploits are in sharp contrast to Joe's refusal to fulfill his own military obligations, Yigal eventually experiences an identity crisis because of his dual nationality. He is a citizen of both the United States and Israel and must choose between the two countries before pursuing his career as an engineer. Through Yigal, Michener introduces the theme of anti-Semitism in the United States and elsewhere around the world. The black Cato and the Jewish Yigal compare their experiences as minorities in the United States. After Cato becomes interested in Islam, Cato and Yigal have intense discussions about religion as well.

Harvey Holt is a veteran of World War II and the Korean War and thus appears to be more traditional than the young characters who disapprove of the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, as Holt spends his engineering career working for established corporations in their most isolated outposts around the world, Michener points out that Holt is somehow as marginal socially as the youth of the 1960s.

The narrator George Fairbanks is also a veteran of World War II and works in Switzerland for World Mutual, an American company. Even though he personifies traditional American patriotic and corporate values, he is open minded and learns from the young characters while imparting his own fatherly wisdom to them.

Of the many minor characters, Clive is the most distinctive. He seems to appear wherever the major characters travel, and he always has with him the newest records from England.

Social Concerns

Published during the Vietnam War, *The Drifters* addresses many of the social concerns that contributed to the revolutionary climate in America and elsewhere during the late 1960s. James Michener addresses the Vietnam War directly by introducing the character Joe, an American college student of draft age who leaves the United States in order to evade the draft. Other older characters, like Britta's father and Harvey Holt, have participated in World War II, and their patriotism to Norway and America, respectively, contrasts with Joe's rebelliousness. Yigal is Joe's age but nonetheless resembles the older characters in his sense of patriotic duty, having fought for Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967.

These conflicting attitudes between and within generations dramatize the confusion caused by the Vietnam War.

Michener also deals with other prominent social issues of the era, such as recreational drug use, the sexual revolution, the ecological movement, racial conflict, and educational reform. The novel explores the effect that these phenomena had on such traditional institutions as religion, labor unions, corporations, and universities. Michener also treats music as a social force and frequently mentions music to reinforce the novel's other social messages. There are many references to songs by Bob Dylan and other socially conscious musicians of the day as well as allusions to songs by the Beatles and others who glorified drug use.

Techniques

Of the book's twelve chapters, each of the first six is devoted to the introduction of a single character, and of the latter six chapters, five are named for different places while one introduces another character. By naming seven chapters for characters and five for places, Michener suggests that the identities of these characters will change as they travel from place to place. Indeed, the young characters all leave home to travel because they are dissatisfied and are looking for alternative experiences and values. Just as the characters change during their travels, Michener demonstrates how the places have all changed over the course of history. For example, the main characters meet in Torremolinos, Spain, a tourist resort where one can speak any language except Spanish. This town's loss of its Spanish identity as a result of the influx of tourists recalls that in previous centuries Spain became Arabic and then reverted to European. The novel's other settings have metamorphosed similarly: North Africa was a garden before it became a desert, and certain African republics have alternated between European and indigenous rule. Just as the individual characters develop and change, nations evolve both politically and naturally.

Themes

Whereas a typical Michener novel focuses on a specific place from prehistory to the present, *The Drifters* is unique to the Michener canon in the sense that it focuses on a specific period, the late 1960s. As the title suggests, the novel's setting changes constantly as Michener offers glimpses of various places as they existed at an isolated moment in history.

If Michener's primary intention in the novel is to capture the mood of America's youth during the Vietnam War, he provides valuable perspective by having his American characters intermingle with youth from Scandinavia, Israel, and Africa. Michener thus suggests that all youth worldwide, not just in America, were traveling abroad at the time in search of alternatives to traditional values. As the Americans travel through Europe and Africa with their newfound friends from abroad, Michener suggests also that America's social turbulence in the late 1960s is not an anomaly, but rather another manifestation of the revolutionary spirit that has existed in all societies since the beginning of time. For example, protesters at the Democratic Party's national convention in Chicago in 1968 are compared to medieval Crusaders; and one popular song of the 1960s reminds Michener of Mozart, Homer, and Sappho. The excessive construction of hotels for tourists on Spain's southern coast recalls how, four hundred years ago, Spain ruined its agriculture and began its tradition of abusing the land by allowing sheep unlimited grazing rights. The people who help draft dodgers escape to Canada during the Vietnam War are compared to the underground railroad, the network of citizens who helped runaway slaves escape to Canada before and during the American Civil War. In writing about a specific period in history, Michener makes history itself a theme in the novel by invoking precedents for the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s.

Key Questions

Michener established his reputation writing novels in which he demonstrates his comprehensive knowledge of the history of specific places. Usually these novels include discussion of prehistoric times and proceed to the present. *The Drifters* is distinctive among Michener's works because it isolates a moment in contemporary history and provides the author with an opportunity to exhibit his understanding of current affairs. As the characters travel through Europe and Africa, Michener still has ample opportunity to expound upon the history of various places, but his primary objective is to write a novel about the 1960s.

1. How does the montage of quotes at the beginning of each chapter prepare the reader for the ensuing chapter?
2. How authentically does Michener portray the generation gap between the younger characters and the older ones, such as Yigal's grandfather Melnifoff, Harvey Holt, and the narrator George Fairbanks?
3. Michener observes that Harvey Holt is as marginal socially as the younger characters, yet Holt seems more traditional than the younger characters. What are the similarities and differences between Holt's marginalization and that of the younger people?
4. The novel is so concerned with social issues that the emotional development of the characters may seem to be of secondary importance. How convincingly does Michener portray the romantic involvements between the characters, as well as their anxieties, fears, and doubts?
5. Compare the gravity of the dilemmas faced by the protagonists: Joe's decision whether or not to face the draft, Cato's choice between Islam and Christianity, and Yigal's choice between living in America or Israel.
6. Monica dies of drug abuse and Britta chooses to subordinate her life to that of a man, Harvey Holt. Does Gretchen's decision to write a book compare to the more dramatic decisions faced by the male protagonists, or does Michener fail in the development of the female protagonists?
7. Would Michener's portrait of the youth of the 1960s be more successful if the narrator were one of the younger characters instead of George Fairbanks?
8. Is Michener ever guilty of subscribing to national, cultural, or racial stereotypes in presenting his characters and settings?
9. Harvey Holt's guiding moral force are films starring Spencer Tracy and Humphrey Bogart. Does this make him a shallow character, or does it make him more sympathetic and believable?



10. How do the Child ballads sung by Gretchen relate to the many popular songs of the 1960s that are discussed in the novel?

Literary Precedents

The setting, theme, and characters of *The Drifters* recall Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926; see separate entry), which Michener mentions in his own novel. Michener's intention in making this allusion is to compare the cynical, expatriated Lost Generation of Hemingway's post-World War I novel to the disaffected youth of the Vietnam War era. Michener's comparison between these two generations of social dropouts is most apparent when his own characters in *The Drifters* reenact the most famous scene in *The Sun Also Rises*, the running of the bulls through the streets of Pamplona, Spain, during the annual fiesta of San Fermin in July.

Related Titles

In 1971, the same year that he published *The Drifters*, Michener published a nonfiction book entitled *Kent State: What Happened and Why*. The release of both books in the same year indicates the intensity of Michener's concern with the effects of the Vietnam War on American youth and society. Considering that much of the action of *The Drifters* transpires in Spain and Portugal, one must recall that Michener had become quite familiar with these locales in preparing *Iberia* (1968), a nonfiction book of travels published only three years before *The Drifters*.



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