

# Eye of the Needle Short Guide

## Eye of the Needle by Ken Follett

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# Characters

Accurate characterization is Follett's writing forte, and Henry Faber, "The Needle" is a fine example of Follett's craft. Faber, the central character of *Eye of the Needle*, is portrayed by Follett as a resourceful and loyal German spy, stationed in London during World War II to collect and transmit Allied defense information to his homeland. His code name "Die Nadel" originates from his customary weapon, a long, needle-thin stiletto, which is frequently used on those who dare threaten his mission.

Follett could easily have depicted Faber as a flat, malicious killer, but as *Time* reviewer, Michael Wood notes, "Follett has given him a personality that sets him apart from spies that typically populate thrillers." For unlike the usual spy, who is indifferently callous toward his victims, Faber has a nagging conscience, which causes him to vomit after every murder he commits. By adding this sympathetic side to Faber's character, Follett endears him to the reader, and Faber therefore dies a martyr instead of a rogue. As Wood so aptly concludes concerning Follett's characters, "they seem to linger in the memory long after the circumstances blur."

Follett presents Fred Bloggs, British Military Intelligence Agent, as a worthy opponent to the cunning Henry Faber. By cleverly recognizing the connection between Faber's code name and his distinctive murder method, Bloggs is able to follow *The Needle's* murderous trail across Britain. Even though Bloggs fails to grasp the overall importance of Faber's mission, he loyally follows his orders to uncover and capture the German agent. His driving motivation, however, is not one of patriotic duty nor admiration for his quarry. It appears to be a burning hatred for Germany itself, the enemy that killed Bloggs's wife during a bombing raid on London. In Bloggs's mind, *The Needle* is one small part of that brutal Nazi monster, and he desperately wishes for revenge. Before Bloggs can reach Storm Island, however, that task is completed by Lucy Rose whom Bloggs later marries in tribute to her bravery. Despite his satisfaction with the death of Faber and the ultimate Allied victory, Bloggs can never forget the treachery of war. Forty years later, at the closing of the novel, Bloggs recalls his past in a warning for the future: "It's far from over."



## Social Concerns

In *Eye of the Needle*, set during World War II, Follett presents an intriguing conflict between patriotism and personal feelings through the character of Lucy Rose. At the end of the novel, patriotism wins out, but not before the heroine's loyalty is sufficiently tested.

Lonely and vulnerable, Lucy Rose is drawn into a desperate love affair with a clever German spy, Henry Faber. At first, she believes the only real threat is to her marriage, a threat she is prepared to accept. However, she later realizes her lover's association with the enemy and is forced to confront the greater threat to her life and to her country. In a final display of wit and courage, Lucy Rose chooses to save Britain and spurn her desire for its enemy. She successfully stops the spy from broadcasting his vital message and then murders him to prevent his relaying the message in person.

## Techniques

Several critics have expressed appreciation for Follett's fine ability to expand upon historical fact when concocting plots for his novels. Robert Lekachman in *Nation* magazine praises Follett's ability to create a "variation upon history."

The complex plot of *Eye of the Needle*, for example, is based upon the secret Allied plan to conceal the actual landing site of the D-Day forces during World War II. In 1944, through an elaborate hoax, the Allies hoped to convince the Germans that the D-Day invasion would take place at Calais rather than Normandy. Although there were very few German spies working in Britain, Follett creates a clever Nazi agent who discovers this key Allied plan and attempts to reveal the information to Hitler. Thus, Follett's plot contains elements of both fact and fiction, a combination which adds a vital dynamic to the novel's fascination. Follett's talent for capturing a reader's curiosity concerning historical events accounts for much of the novel's popular success, or at least, as Follett states, "one suspects something like this must have happened."



# Themes

Through the complex interaction of three dynamic characters, Follett focuses in *Eye of the Needle* upon the hazards of social isolation. David and Lucy Rose along with Henry Faber are all portrayed by Follett as victims of their own isolation.

By quickly withdrawing to Storm Island at the beginning of World War II, David Rose misses the deterioration in human values brought about by the worldwide conflict. David seems to envision an enemy who is honorable, much like himself, a British gentleman.

He is mistaken, however, and his dying words shed light on his confused state of mind: "It's not fair," he shouts to Faber as he falls to his death. But as Faber shouts after him: "Not fair?"

"Don't you know there's a war going on?" As his last words indicate, David is inadequately aware of the moral toll of the distant war due to his secluded life on Storm Island. Thus, David has forgotten how to hate his enemy and has committed the fatal mistake of trusting him.

Lucy Rose also mistakenly trusts the enemy in the form of the courteous and handsome Faber. She, like her husband, has led a secluded life on Storm Island, far away from the treachery of war. During their first conversation, she is rendered defenseless by Faber's cunning perception. He remarks, "You've lost the art of dissembling in four years on this island," thereby summarizing her diminished character.

This vulnerability might have been fatal, but fortunately for Lucy Rose, Faber's own isolation causes him to become the victim instead.

Henry Faber, by his own admission, "had led the life of a monk for seven years, and did not normally permit himself the indulgence of sentiment."

But unlike David and Lucy Rose, whose isolation was guaranteed by the physical barrier of the sea, Faber's alienation from humanity has been necessitated by his all-absorbing mission. In a room full of people, Faber considered it advisable to remain alone. Maintaining this seclusion has required great courage, and it is only after meeting Lucy Rose that Faber's resolve begins to weaken. Lucy Rose wins her battle of will with Faber not because she is clever or strong but because Faber is weakened by many years of emotional solitude. In the end, when he finds himself incapable of killing Lucy Rose, this one surrender to sentiment proves to be his undoing.

# Adaptations

Eye of the Needle was produced as a motion picture in 1981 by Stephen Friedman for MGM/United Artists. It was filmed on location in England, Scotland, and on the Isle of Mull, with David Sutherland starring as Henry Faber and Kate Nelligan as Lucy Rose.

According to Magill's Cinema Annual (1982), the production received "mixed to negative reviews." An example is the review by Newsweek critic, David Ansen, who both applauds and pans the film. Ansen praises Stanley Mann for his "straightforward and unembellished adaptation" of Follett's plot but discredits director Richard Marquand, noting that "he may have overestimated the strength of the story." At the end of the article, Ansen labels the movie "dull and predictable."

On the other hand, New York film critic David Denby appreciated Eye of the Needle's quiet suspense and simplicity. He admitted that the movie "would not inspire new magazine cover stories, fashion shows, or celebrity-filled parties," saying in its defense, "It's a movie, not a media event."

# Literary Precedents

Upon publication of *Eye of the Needle*, critics compared Follett's novel to other contemporary thrillers produced by John le Carre and Helen MacInnes.

More importantly, Michael Wood's article in *The Saturday Review* places Follett's novel alongside the classic, *The Day of The Jackal*, because both thrillers contain "a double narrative focused on the pursuer and the pursued, with suspense extremely well sustained."

Also, both novels are based upon a fictional variation of World War II events that culminate in last minute action which is key to the Allied defense effort. As *Publishers' Weekly* concluded concerning the literary rank of *Eye of the Needle*: "This World War II espionage tale is right up there with the best of them."





# Copyright Information

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