

A Flag for Sunrise Short Guide

A Flag for Sunrise by Robert Stone

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Characters

Caught up "among spies, gun runners, murderers, maniacs, and revolutionaries," Frank Holliwell is clearly the protagonist of *A Flag for Sunrise*; his character, however, is delicately interwoven with those of Father Egan, the rector of the mission Holliwell is sent to investigate, his assistant, the morally earnest Sister Justine, and the erratic nomad Pablo Tabor, a Coast Guard deserter who drifts into the turmoil in Tecan by hypothetical accident. Similar to the protagonists in Stone's earlier fiction, Holliwell is alcoholic, self-destructive, and amoral. Anthropologist by profession and former free-lance CIA agent by design, Holliwell apparently enjoys flirtation with danger.

Characteristic of the fictional hero-adventurer, Holliwell is drawn to Tecan by the scent of excitement and intrigue.

Obsessed with the spiritual need to discover self, Holliwell ends his journey with a ritualistic confrontation with his own mortality.

Bristling with religious overtones, the novel serves as a platform for the characters of Father Egan and Sister Justine to test the parameters of faith in the modern world. Weathered by the storm of contemporary absurdity, the philosopher-priest is observed sinking into a form of mystical gnosticism while Sister Justine attempts to reaffirm her distorted sense of devotion by sacrifice in the name of liberating revolution. Striving for perfection in an imperfect world, Sister Justine is characteristic of other Stone heroine-victims, including Gertrude in *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967) and Marge in *Dog Soldiers* (1974), primarily existing for man's solace or salvation. Seeking a far more disturbing liberation is Pablo.

Burnt-out, homicidal, and intrinsically doomed, Pablo replaced God with pills and the price of exaltation is physical release by death.

Attesting to Stone's artistic development as a writer, *A Flag for Sunrise* incorporates a vast assortment of supporting characters to accentuate the action of the novel. Whether participants, observers, profiteers, or casualties in the human drama unfolding in Tecan, Stone's characters either electrify or mesmerize the reader. In addition, Stone achieves a stunning success in paralleling the lives of the major characters, especially Holliwell and Pablo, to eventually collide by the novel's end in a perverse configuration of unity.

Social Concerns/Themes

Recognizing striking and disturbing similarities between the Vietnam experience and the current political situation in Central America, Stone sounds a timely and volatile note in his third novel, *A Flag for Sunrise*. Set in the republic of Tecan, modeled in part after present-day Nicaragua, the novel is at once a political thriller and metaphysical journey into an unequivocal hell on earth. Representative of other Third World countries embroiled by American presence and dictated by corruption, abuse, and brutality, Tecan, will become the stage for a drama of events and ideas bound together by the spiritual death of innocence.

Having previously worked in an unexplained capacity for the CIA in Vietnam, Frank Holliwel is approached by a former associate to investigate the political rumblings in Tecan while on a university lecture tour in a neighboring country. Initially refusing his services, Holliwel later consents not by any sense of duty but rather by impulse and curiosity. The focus of the investigation is a Roman Catholic mission run by an aging priest and young, idealistic nun who are suspected of having revolutionary leanings. Awaiting his arrival, however, is a nightmarish amalgam of contemporary horror, and Holliwel is immediately swept into the turbulence of the country.

In the novel, Stone utilizes the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict as a thematic element, analyzing as he did in *Dog Soldiers* the impact of the war on American sensitivity. Convinced that Vietnam evoked a contemporary "fascination" with the concept of violence, Stone is issuing a warning that Vietnam could well repeat itself in Central America. His characters serve to illustrate the price of American intervention: fear, alienation, paranoia, and despair.



Techniques

In *A Flag for Sunrise*, Stone creates a realistic and suspenseful novel seemingly possessed by a menacing sense of impending doom. Drawing heavily on plot development and enhancing the action with a continuous stream of complex, engaging characters to attract attention, Stone is attempting to both entertain and instruct his readers.

Criticized for being episodic and disjointed in structure, the novel represents an artistic challenge for Stone.

Consequently, the novel's most successful quality is Stone's ability to re-create real experience into the fictional lives of his characters. In the process, Stone provides vivid and often transcendent descriptions to supplement his thematic concerns. Likewise, his dialogue is at once capable of vibrant intensity and lyrical brilliance.

Although flawed as a serious work of art, the novel represents a significant step in Stone's progression as an artist.



Key Questions

1. It seems unlikely that any good will ever come to the inhabitants of Tecan. Does Stone offer any conditions for optimism in a country plagued by greed, corruption, and brutality?
2. Discuss the development of Father Egan during the course of the novel. What are the elements responsible for his growth as a character?
3. Alcohol and drug usage are controlling elements for several of the major characters of the novel. How does this dependence help to define Stone's characters?
4. Is it impulse and curiosity that bring Holliwell to Tecan? What else could have impacted on his decision to observe the activities of Egan and Sister Justin?
5. While scuba diving off the coast of Tecan, Holliwell confronts the reality of absolute terror. How is his character changed by the experience?
6. What importance does sexual intrusion play in the development of the novel?
7. Pablo Tabor has been called the most "compelling" character in the novel. What signifies the intensity of his personality?
8. What similarities exist between the characters of Holliwell and Pablo?
9. Sister Justin is clearly a unique creation for Stone. Is she as one critic describes her a "little too good to be true"?
10. Holliwell is both casualty and survivor of his Vietnam experience.
How is this also true about his experience in Tecan? How is the presence of Vietnam reflected in the current situation in Tecan?

Literary Precedents

Incorporating suspense with melodramatic as well as cinematic techniques, Stone attempts in *A Flag for Sunrise* to portray the social and political decadence of the modern world derived in part from the fictional oeuvre of Graham Greene, notably in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The Quiet American* (1955), *The Comedians* (1966), and *The Honorary Consul* (1973). Like Greene, Stone is drawn to a locale that heightens the intensity and complexity of thematic elements by association with danger and uncertainty. Characters are confronted with circumstances that force them by necessity to redefine themselves as a means of survival.

Recognizing the chaotic and surreal nature of the political turmoil in Central America as conducive to fictional treatment, Stone, like Joan Didion in *Salvador* (1982), captures in *A Flag for Sunrise* the magnitude and futility of the contemporary situation.

Related Titles

Similar to both *A Hall of Mirrors* and *Dog Soldiers*, *A Flag for Sunrise* uses a political situation to serve as the backdrop for the action of the novel. Exploring the parameters of American involvement in Central America, Stone creates in *A Flag for Sunrise* a venue for debate concerning the diverse elements that have shaped American foreign policy. For Stone, the parallel between Central America and Vietnam signifies a course of action both predictable and ultimately destructive.



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