

Far Tortuga Short Guide

Far Tortuga by Peter Matthiessen

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Contents

Far Tortuga Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Related Titles.....	7
Copyright Information.....	8



Characters

The main characters of *Far Tortuga* are the nine members of the crew of the *Lillias Eden*, who put to sea in the Caribbean south of Cuba on a hunt for green turtle. Because they hail from Grand Cayman Island or its immediate neighbors, the reader must contend with a sense of history and culture that is at once primitive and modern, a kind of exotic interface between the two, producing a site for the novel to develop largely independent of expectations. Some of the characters are to a degree stereotypes, as for example the loving but inept son Buddy or the rum-sodden Vemon, and they serve as sounding boards for the actions and ideas of the others. Some remain cryptic in their function, like the consumptive Athens or the surly Brown. The reader's attention is perhaps most immediately drawn to the raging Captain Raib or the amiable Byrum, yet one comes to find, surprisingly, that the main character of the novel has all along been Speedy.

Distinguished from the other crewmen by his Honduran background, Speedy seems to recede during the novel, rendered inconsequential by his eager, apparently empty-headed acceptance of all that takes place. Yet he is the lone survivor of the *Eden's* ill-fated voyage, and the reader must ask why.

It is a mistake to merely assume that what distinguishes Speedy is the modicum of compassion he displays for the weaknesses of Brown, Vemon, Buddy, and the rest. That compassion is there, and with it a kind of wisdom in the affairs of men, but Speedy is also capable of violence, as "speedy" with a knife as with an oar. What marks Speedy is the very inconsequence that tends to mask his primacy. His actions, his speech, his being are "inconsequential," in a sense reflective of Zen parable. In his acceptance of the life around him, his ability to roll with the waves, Speedy is one of the men Matthiessen speaks of in *The Snow Leopard* (1978) as spontaneously leading Zen lives without being aware of it. Byrum's dream of *Far Tortuga* is not for Speedy: "Got no dream, mon. I got fifty-five acres, mon, and cows. I go along every day, do what I got to do, and den I lays down to my rest."

Speedy's survival, appropriately, is itself as paradoxical as a Zen koan. The most caring member of the crew must kill his weakening friend Byrum in order to insure his own survival; the freely rootless man is the only one with a real home to return to. At the end of the novel, Speedy "survives," but like Lewis Moon at the end of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1965), only to stand alone on a nameless shore.



Social Concerns/Themes

In *Far Tortuga*, Matthiessen continues in many ways the explorations begun in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. But the configurations of the later novel allow a more perfectly executed rendering, not only in that here the setting of a voyage isolates the characters more completely in a microcosm of the world, but that the land world of these men, the Cayman Islands, is itself unreal, exotic. The richness of entry, for the reader, into this novel, the haunting sense of "being there" created by the stark description and dialogue, may obscure the apprehension of Matthiessen's commentary. Yet it is present nonetheless, in the lyrics of a Hank Williams song from the mouth of the feral, sociopathic engineer, in the easy juxtaposition of diesel engines and obeah.

Far Tortuga offers a sometimes amusing, sometimes painful parody of the quest for glory, the maintenance of blood rights and inheritance, and the distinctions of social class and superior race, the persistence of pretense amid squalor. While the continued questioning of who is really a "man" often reveals only macho posturing, there remains a level on which there is no other question worth asking. Thus, even though Raib and Desmond's struggle over the possession of their father is grotesque, with the aged Captain Andrew comically suspended in his chair over the decks of their two ships, and even though the tale of Steadman Bodden reveals that to follow blindly the authority of the Master means death, the presence of the father — the meaning conferred on one's life by the continuity of generations — is not so easily dismissed. The story of Steadman Bodden, delivered only after prolonged expectation, usurps the text during its telling; the stroke-crippled Captain Andrew's only words to the son who presumes him dead are simply "not yet."

Thus, with one exception, the crew of the *Eden* are lost in a recurrent coming to terms with the past: the recognition, amidst the decay, of a dissolution, a pervasive sense of loss. Only Speedy, with his shrug of "modern time, mon," can resist the encroachment of an increasingly valueless, technologized world, and all that it portends. The rest are mired in their search not only for the elusive green turtle, but for the mysterious "Far Tortuga."

Techniques

Far Tortuga differs from Matthiessen's earlier novels in its bold and sometimes risky experiments in form.

With a determined avoidance of authorial intrusion, this novel offers a minimum of exposition or explanation.

Characters are thus revealed almost solely through the quality of their voices, with the result that Far Tortuga more often resembles a screenplay than a traditional narrative. Matthiessen has commented upon this feature of the novel, and explains it as necessary in his attempt to create on the turtle boat "a small isolated world, a confined state which nobody could leave, and men who sing the refrains of their bewilderment over and over." Since the voices the reader hears singing here are sometimes unattributed, some have complained that the bewilderment is contagious. But the richly evocative text thus produced, the ominous, almost surreal air that pervades the novel, is undeniable. The narrative fragmentation of Far Tortuga is not merely a curiosity of technique; it is an element of the larger vision of the novel, a reflection of the fragmented lives of the characters and an inability of language to create coherence from them.

Matthiessen extends his formal manipulations into the area of typography as well. Fragments of prose are sometimes scattered about the page, deaths of characters are announced by the appearance of their names and an inky splotch on a page otherwise blank, and curious abstract sketches begin to appear toward the book's conclusion.

Matthiessen has acknowledged the influence of Japanese Sumi painting, and the spare simplicity of haiku, on the composition of Far Tortuga: The play of white space, he explains, was the result of his desire to "achieve resonance, to make the reader receive things intuitively, hear the silence in the wind, for instance, that is a constant presence in the book." To make the reader "hear the silence in the wind" is a tall order for any writer; it is the mark of Matthiessen's genius that he has accomplished exactly that.



Key Questions

Surely the unusual, demanding formal quality of this novel will be the first topic of discussion, as reading it may well create negative responses and a feeling of being lost. Discussion may well center upon why Matthiessen has selected such an uncommon method of storytelling, and what possible advantages it may hold. Its impressionistic qualities may as well give rise to impressionistic responses, which can then be expanded into a discussion of themes.

1. Does the unusual experimental form Matthiessen adopts here — the dependence on dialogue, the typographical effects — serve its purposes?

What would be lost, or gained, by telling the story in a more conventional way?

2. The form of the book tends to mute authorial comment on the actions of the characters. Where does the author invest his sympathies — in what character or characters?

3. What is it exactly that Captain Raib is trying to impress upon his crew, and why are they unable to learn their lesson from him? Is he too inflexible, or merely mired in the past?

4. What significance can be attached to the name of the ship, the Lillias Eden?

5. What function does Desmond Eden play in this novel, for Raib, or as a symbol in general?

6. In what ways do the ideas of Darwinism manifest themselves in this book, with respect to ways of life, human beings, or the natural world?

7. In what way does Speedy occupy a mediating position between Brown and Raib?

8. Can Speedy's killing of Byrum be morally justified? What qualities does Speedy possess that determine his survival, out of all the crew?

9. Although perhaps no other literary symbol is as sweepingly inclusive as "the sea," what, in this novel in particular, does the sea symbolize?

Related Titles

Readers of Matthiessen's novels will find further expansions on his key concerns and beliefs in his nonfiction.

The questions of cultural relativity raised in *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga* find their echoes in such works as *Under the Mountain Wall* (1962) and *The Cloud Forest* (1961). His passionate championing of oppressed minorities manifests itself in *Indian Country* (1984), *Men's Lives* (1991), and elsewhere. And his deep attachment and dedication to the beauty and mystery of nature are evidenced everywhere. Perhaps the most thorough immersion in Matthiessen's world can be gained from *The Snow Leopard*, where he chronicles, in journal form, his pilgrimage to the Crystal Monastery in Nepal in 1973. While it offers the record of the sights and sounds of that journey, it also contains Matthiessen's reassessment of his values and beliefs in the wake of his wife's painful death from cancer, his meditations upon one man's place in relation to himself and others, and what may well be the clearest explanation of the central tenets of Zen Buddhism available in English. It is a stunning, extraordinary book, well deserving of the popularity and praise it has achieved.



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