

The Holcroft Covenant Short Guide

The Holcroft Covenant by Robert Ludlum

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Characters

As a spy-suspense thriller, *The Holcroft Covenant* is not in the tradition of rich, rounded characterization more typical of mainstream or major fiction.

The characters are stock types, with the interest being the plot, the way the problem confronting the hero-protagonist is solved.

Noel Holcroft is an essentially good, moral character with whom the reader is led to identify throughout the elaborate shifts of the plot. Born the son of a Nazi minister of finance, he is taken away as an infant by his mother, in the action before the inception of the novel's plot. The villain he essentially confronts throughout the novel is Johann von Tiebolt, aka John Tennyson, aka The Tinamou, a notorious international assassin. In this popular formula novel, the opposition of the main characters is very sharply drawn — von Tiebolt, a former Hitler Youth and would-be second Hitler, is as vilely evil as his hero-antagonist opposite Noel Holcroft is moral and politically normal.

The premise of the novel is characteristic of Ludlum's favorite formula: an essentially normal, moral American person is dragged into the world of international intrigue, and he gradually learns to fight, to cope, even to triumph. *The Holcroft Covenant* is a plan hatched by a group of Nazis at the end of World War II, a written document with accompanying funds to act as directions to be carried out by their survivors. Seven hundred and eighty million dollars have been secreted in a Swiss bank by the time of the start of the novel, and these funds are only to be released when three selected members from the three Nazi families who drew up the agreement sign the release. To deceive the American branch of this group, the documents speak of using the funds to "make amends" for Holocaust survivors. In actuality, as the two European branches of this troika know, the real purpose is to restart the Nazi Reich through mobilizing the dispersed children of the Nazis.

Holcroft, as the selected American, learns the truth of this covenant only gradually, and at very great cost. In the meantime, he is deceived, threatened, beaten, and manipulated by warring factions, and he blunders also into confrontations with honest and legitimate surveillance police and government agents. The essential problem confronting him is perceptual — almost like the reader, he learns who is who only gradually, in the process often siding with the wrong group, mistaking enemies for friends through no fault of his own. The terrible world in which he moves forces him to become more brutalized as the novel moves along, and he is initiated into a world of deception, spying, intrigue, and violence within which he starts to feel at home, or is at least able to function well. Ludlum keeps the line between good and evil types sharply drawn, however, and one sign of this is that Holcroft never shoots one of the good characters by mistake.



Social Concerns

As a spy-suspense thriller, *The Holcroft Covenant* does not put forward social concerns in a systematic or densely wrought manner, but references to a haunted past and fears of contemporary governmental abuses are part of the emotional impact of this novel. The main social or historical reference raises the nightmare of a potential resurgence of Nazism, spearheaded by a group of children of Nazis who had been deliberately dispersed around the world just prior to the collapse of the Third Reich. Such a phenomenon might not literally be possible — but a militant, even fanatic nationalism has been growing in a number of Third World countries.

Throughout the novel, the hero, Noel Holcroft, is attacked and deluded by the neo-Nazis, often with the help of people in a number of world governments, including the Americans. As the plot develops, it turns out that most of these accomplices are dispersed Nazi children, now grown up to continue the evil ways of their forbears, but the impression of duplicitous, even evil government figures remains — and *The Holcroft Covenant* came to print not long after the Watergate scandal, a low point in American mistrust of government. That a government, even an ostensible democracy, can perhaps grow corrupt is a social concern at least implicit in this thriller. In addition, the violence of the multiple murders and assassinations that occur in the sweep of the novel reflects an acknowledgement of the violent side of contemporary life, with its terrorism, political splinter groups, and underworld.



Techniques

Elaborate plotting is the chief feature of *The Holcroft Covenant*. A spy-suspense novel succeeds or fails chiefly by the way it holds the reader's interest tightly to the plot, the line of action, and Ludlum's string of best sellers indicates that he holds enough readers' interests to succeed in this genre. Ludlum keeps the reader at bay through the use of parceled-out bits of information, as does any mystery writer, and he discusses the truth almost simultaneously with the hero. To prevent reader confusion, and since he is writing for a mass audience, Ludlum fills in with exposition or a shift of point of view to keep the developing action clear.

After years in the theater, Ludlum knows well the power that persists in the age-old stock types — hero, villain, seductress, deceiver, and so on, and his stock types help to move the plot along. The struggle of the good-guy hero against a diabolical villain is often called the basic opposition of any story. A clearly defined protagonist and the antagonist who opposes him remain the central polarity of this novel, the spine of action along which the plot is developed. That key opposition is certainly the main plot interest of *The Holcroft Covenant*.

A related, subtler feature of the novel's construction is the pervasive twinning or doubling that Ludlum writes into the story. In many ways, Holcroft and von Tiebolt-Tennyson are twin or double figures, the main difference being moral, absolute evil versus almost absolute good. Perhaps Ludlum is implying something about the early environment of children, since Holcroft was spirited out of Germany and raised in America by a mother who sheltered him from his Nazi father's existence and by a legal father who provided a good foundation, while von Tiebolt was a Hitler Youth who was then taken to Brazil for terrorist training and indoctrination. But they are also alike, in their birth, their potential; when the two finally meet, there is something of a sense of recognition in addition to the heavier moral contrasts.

Doubling is evident in the two seemingly neo-Nazi factions which war throughout the novel, both using Holcroft as a cover, and with one finally unveiling itself as good. There could be implicit statements about the potentially good or evil sides of any individual or society implicit in all this doubling, but interpretation should not be pressed in such a thriller. Ludlum's primary aim is to keep the reader's interest.

Themes

Ludlum has said that he writes from a sense of outrage, often at the abuse of power by political extremists of right and left. *The Holcroft Covenant* evinces the theme of abuse of government power, where an arch-right terrorist organization makes free use of government services to the detriment of a good citizen, Noel Holcroft, who in this way represents the average citizenry. Almost a paranoid quality rises from this spy thriller, where for half the novel, at least, the forces of evil seem to have free, unlimited access to the computer banks, phone networks, surveillance police and other potentially coercive apparatus of the modern state, while the hero is comparatively isolated and must fend for himself.

A complementary theme arises from this unfair conflict, and it is the central theme of the novel: the ability of the individual to struggle, sometimes successfully, against the collective enemy, or even the whole coercive state. As *The Holcroft Covenant* progresses, Noel Holcroft becomes more adept at the deadly maneuvers of intrigue, violence and manipulation that his adversaries use against him, and in the end he is well on the way to winning.

Still a third theme, closely related to the other two, is implicit in this novel.

The Holcroft Covenant reemphasizes the age-old theme of the deceptiveness of evil. For much of the book, Holcroft is misled by evil forces posing as good, and he mistakes good and evil forces repeatedly until the final unveilings near the end of the book. Such deliberate confusions are part and parcel of any suspense or mystery story, but the degree to which deceptiveness comes into play raises this concern to the thematic level. Ludlum is also basically optimistic in his depiction of this theme of deceptive evil, since Holcroft is able to sort truth from lies, good from evil, when really put to the test.

Adaptations

The 1985 film based on the novel, directed by John Frankenheimer, starred Michael Caine. The film, which was slow but intriguing, was of more interest to spy enthusiasts than general audiences.

Ray Miller, Jr.

Literary Precedents

Ludlum writes in the mystery-spy novel genre, and immediate precedents from Ian Fleming and Eric Ambler, among other writers, are noticeable.

Like Ian Fleming, Ludlum sets his works in exotic locations, and he liberally spices his style with name-dropping in the fashion of Fleming. Unlike le Carre and some other spy writers, Ludlum does not have the professional spy background, although *The Holcroft Covenant* is as involved as some of Ambler's political intrigue novels (for example the complexities of *Doctor Frigo*). The closest single parallel is from another writer of best-selling popular thrillers: Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) is a very close parallel, and its resolution, conflict, and central premise involve the same general kind of cast of characters.



Related Titles

Perhaps because much of his youth was spent during the rise of fascism and World War II, Ludlum is apparently quite interested in writing about the dangers of the modern state turning into a fascist state. *The Aquitaine Progression* (1984) involves the main character, Joel Converse, a gifted lawyer and a Vietnam veteran, battling an international military conspiracy to create a fascist takeover of all of the non-Soviet world. A cabal of five generals — an American, a Frenchman, a South African, an Israeli and a British M.I. 6 Intelligence agent — have developed an elaborate conspiracy to undermine the entire Western world. Each, frustrated with what he sees as a failure of nerve by democratic, civilian government, has vowed to engineer a kind of international fascist takeover.

Ludlum's concern is the abuses of entrenched state power and the danger of an extremist takeover. The cabal (they call themselves "Aquitaine" after a mythical reading of French history) have evidently gained thousands of followers, especially within the military of various Western governments.

As in *The Holcroft Covenant*, for much of the novel the computer banks, phone nets and media possibilities of modern society are turned against the hero, with a small group of his allies only coming to his aid near the end of the novel.

The potential for a totalitarian state arising out of a modern democracy — or even for an alliance of such states — is the main theme of *The Aquitaine Progression*. Ludlum's villainous generals come close to succeeding in their scheme, largely due to popular frustrations with the slow-moving, bureaucratic quality of modern democracies.

A related theme, part of the danger of fascism, is Ludlum's fear of the potential too many people show for unthinking, blind obedience to authority, even when the authority is evil.

Such a fear is evident in all the legions of Aquitaine followers and soldiers seen in this novel.

As is the case with any Ludlum thriller, there is a sharply drawn contrast between good protagonist and villainous antagonist, Joel Converse versus the whole Aquitaine conspiracy, with its five leaders and their hordes of followers. As the novel opens, the "progression" that is the means Aquitaine hopes will achieve its ends already is in motion — a series of increasing terrorist acts are planned, culminating in mass assassinations of world leaders which would raise the cry for a military takeover, finally ending with the five essentially ruling in the West. Converse learns about this from an old friend who is killed before he can tell him very much.

Converse has two sides to his character, that of a skilled international lawyer and a tenacious, strong Vietnam combat veteran. Both aspects of his character come into play in the plot, as he attempts to gather legally convincing evidence against the conspiracy while physically defeating their soldiers sent to kill him. Most of the plot line is structured



around Ludlum's favorite chase by terrorists. In the second half of the story, Converse's wife, Valarie, assists him, almost losing her life in the process.

The villains are brutal stock types, especially the legless General Marcus Delavane, who commands the conspiracy from a computer-linked room in Palo Alto, California. They come close to their hoped-for takeover, but in the end a small group of intelligence agents combined with military loyal to their respective governments put down the Aquitaine conspiracy. Three of the five die, but two — the British intelligence agent and the Israeli general — escape.



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