

The Inheritance Short Guide

The Inheritance by Claudia Von Canon

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Overview

The Inheritance will appeal to readers who enjoy experiencing another time and place through the eyes of attractive and lively characters. The novel offers chapters of fast-moving adventure contrasted with more contemplative, slowpaced chapters that develop the relationship between Miguel de Roxas, the nineteen-year-old medical student, and Veronica (Vron) Faber, the accomplished daughter of Bartholomaeus Faber, the Swiss bookseller and printer.

Their relationship develops as they work together on editing the biography of Miguel's dead father. Not only does romance develop, but so too does Miguel's understanding of his father's life, the most important inheritance he receives from his father.

About the Author

Claudia Von Canon was born and educated in her native city of Vienna, Austria. She studied both harpsichord and voice and, after coming to the United States in 1956, taught music at a variety of levels from elementary school to graduate school, including at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *The Moonclock* and *The Inheritance*, both historical novels, are her only major works for young adults, although she has also written articles and essays both on music and about Austria.

Both of her novels have been recognized by inclusion on lists of best books. *The Moonclock*, which is set in Vienna in 1683, is included in both the American Library Association's Notable Children's Books 1976-1980 and Major Books for Young Adults. *The Inheritance*, which is set in Europe (primarily Spain, Italy, and Switzerland) during the sixteenth century, is listed in the University of Chicago Press's *The Best in Children's Books 1979-1984* and is included as a Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies for 1983. *The Bulletin for the Center for Children's Books* also recognized the high quality of *The Inheritance* by granting it a starred review (denoting special distinction). Von Canon's work for young adults, although limited, provides a unique perspective on historical times and places not often encountered in young adult books.



Setting

The sights, sounds, and smells of sixteenth-century Europe come alive in *The Inheritance*. The novel begins with the shocking scene of sixty Spaniards being executed in an auto-da-fé in Madrid and continues through recreations of Spanish aristocratic life, Italian street scenes, medical school in Padua, a peasant village in Austria, and the burgher society of Basel, Switzerland.

Readers bask in the warmth of Spanish courtyards and shiver with Vrone and Miguel through a freezing December in Switzerland.

Von Canon makes each locale distinctly real through details that appeal to the senses. What is most striking is Von Canon's recreation of sound and smell. After Miguel returns home to Saragossa after the news of his father's death, for example, he awakens: "Miguel awoke at the ringing of the Vesper bells, conscious of a subtle fragrance he had breathed while asleep. A bowl filled with grapes and anise pastries was on the night stand. . . . He took one of the cakes. It melted in his mouth. Then he pulled off a grape. Its sweet juice complemented the bitter flavor of the anise." Here, the tastes are vivid and palpable. Von Canon's descriptions are not simply tableaux of landscapes, but bustle with activity.

She describes Miguel's return from the meeting with Don Pedro: To the sound of the Ave bells, Dona Soledad was watering the flowers on her balcony when she heard approaching hoofbeats and the clattering of wheels on the square's cobblestones. A carriage appeared and stopped in front of the Roxas house. She saw Miguel alight from it, followed by a corpulent monk whom he was helping to descend. It was Padre Domingo. The latter said a few words to the soldiers, who saluted and marched away.

The immediacy of these images, particularly in the Spanish portion early in the novel, help the reader to recreate the world of Miguel's childhood, the richness of the Spanish aristocratic life, and the central role of the Catholic religion. The totality of the picture helps explain the difficulty of Miguel's decision to abandon that life for the uncertainties that face him as a fugitive with little money.

The Inheritance also confronts the philosophical, religious, economic, and educational issues of the time. Von Canon exposes the evils of the Spanish Inquisition not only in terms of its appalling cruelty, but also as a result of the decline of the ruling family and in terms of its practical effects on the economy of Spain. Miguel recalls Juan de Roxas's concerns over the competence of King Philip and the general sense that the purging of the so-called heretics is also eliminating the peasants and tradesmen who are the "hands of Spain." Von Canon explains the confusion that exists within the Catholic church, where not only does sincere religious difference of opinion exist, but also greed and insensitivity. Miguel can be pursued and threatened by Catholic cleric Padre Domingo and the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor's secretary Gil de Vega and later protected and rescued by an Aragonese Catholic prior whose mother happened to be a Jewish convert to Catholicism.



Miguel's adventures in a variety of countries not only allow Von Canon to introduce Miguel to the people and events that change his life, but also allow the reader to experience the cultural and philosophical differences among the peoples of various European countries. Furthermore, through the device of Juan de Roxas's retrospective manuscript of his life, we can understand the recent history of Europe under Emperor Charles V. *The Inheritance* poses questions about the role of religion and government but does so in a personal way that allows us to experience the larger issues through the eyes of the characters. Miguel's story is precisely placed in a historical milieu that allows the reader to live in the sixteenth century.

Social Sensitivity

Good readers, especially those with an interest in history, will find *The Inheritance* a rewarding novel. It does not skirt the harsher aspects of life in a harsh era, so readers must expect to encounter the horrors of the Inquisition, the crude quality of medical education, even in Padua, the realities of disease, and the occasional violence of Miguel's encounters with his pursuers.

Miguel, for example, calmly summons his medical training to decide how to kill Camacho. He settles on a blow to the carotid artery and then strikes him "on his bobbing Adam's apple. Dropping on his knee beside him, he delivered yet another blow against Camacho's head." Even before page 20, we have encountered the burning of sixty heretics, the "loose" woman Angiolina climbing out of Miguel's bed, and a suicide attempt where an acquaintance of Miguel's has slashed his wrists, "two rivulets of dark liquid" oozing from his veins. These elements are presented realistically but not in an extremely or exaggeratedly graphic fashion and for the most part serve to add authenticity and drama to the historical novel.

Von Canon deals sympathetically with the Spanish Jews who are being persecuted by the Inquisition, focusing on Juan de Roxas's enlightened attitude and integrity as he gives his life to protect his Jewish friends and to safeguard the truth.

Some readers might regard Vrone Faber's character as anachronistic. Von Canon draws her as a strong, intelligent, well-educated girl who essentially runs the publishing business, especially in later portions of the novel. Von Canon and the characters in the novel acknowledge how unusual this situation is, and perhaps the seeming historical inaccuracy here may be excused in exchange for a spirited and strong female character who probably did not exist, but who possibly may have existed.

Literary Qualities

Stylistically, much of *The Inheritance* focuses on verisimilitude of time and place. The dialogue, the diction, the details of everyday existence all contribute to a composite picture of life in the sixteenth century. Von Canon is particularly adept at describing life in the various countries of the novel. The portrait of the de Roxas kitchen illustrates her skill: "The sun-filled kitchen with its familiar, garlic-dominated smells, gave him [Miguel] for a few moments the illusion that nothing whatever had happened since he had watched Paca making her town-famous chorizos during his last vacation. The copper pans hung from the blackened rafters; the majolica plates stood on their shelves. When he was a child, the kitchen had been his delight, with its huge fireplace, its sink, whose bluegreen tiles echoed those on the outer house wall, and its beams festooned with garlands of peppers, onions, and garlic. The rush-bottomed chairs around the table had seen much service, and so had the table itself, its scrubbed top showing the scars of years of bread-cutting." The reader always knows what is on the menu, whether it is a humble soup of chickpeas or a roasted chicken accompanied by a goblet of wine.

Von Canon attempts the same fidelity in the dialogue, although here, despite her generally successful attempts to use local terminology and to give the flavor of the earlier period, the dialogue can seem somewhat stilted.

She also uses offhand details like the reference to the person who was punished for chewing the communion wafer instead of swallowing it whole or the thief who has his hand cut off, as further attempts to recreate the historical milieu.

The narrative technique combines elements of the mystery with the historical novel. Miguel's (and our) knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Juan de Roxas's death unfolds over the course of the narrative.

Pieces of the puzzle fall into place until nearly the end of the first Basel section, primarily through the use of Juan de Roxas's vita (the biographical manuscript). Although some critics (for example, Ruth L. Gordon and Shirley Wilton) regard this portion of the novel as heavy on history and slow-paced, this section gives us the contrast between the recent history of Spain under the leadership of Charles V, to whom Juan de Roxas was physician; a moving portrait of Marguerite Steen, Miguel's mother; and a fascinating glimpse into the scholarly life and the life at medical school when knowledge of the human body was changing rapidly. It is over this manuscript also that Miguel and Vrone fall in love and where we learn a great deal about each of them.

Von Canon uses a similar technique of letters in her earlier novel, *The Moonclock*.

In addition to the slow exposition of the history of Juan de Roxas's life and death, Von Canon uses multiple shifts in point of view, especially at the beginning of the novel, to create dramatic irony. The reader knows about the death of Miguel's father before Miguel does, and the reader also knows of Don Pedro's orders to have Miguel watched.



As the narrative spans a period of several years and geographically ranges through many of the countries of Europe, Von Canon clearly expresses her sympathies for the vigor of the cosmopolitan outlook and the value of education. Over and over again the novel describes the claustrophobic and insular quality of Spain. King Philip embodies the exhausted and inbred royal line, and Spain is viewed both from inside and out as a country bent on destroying itself. The range of the novel helps to delineate the opposite of this image. Beyond the borders of Spain one finds vigor and intellectual excitement, as well as innovations and discoveries. Miguel himself represents this vigor. He is the son of a Spaniard, yes, but he has also inherited the startling blue eyes of his mother Marguerite Steen. Miguel carries on his father's legacy in yet another way by marrying the daughter of the Swiss printer.

Tempting though it may be, Von Canon avoids portraying Spain as the villain and also avoids being patronizing. She recognizes the evils of the Inquisition and is sympathetic to its victims, but the overall tone of the work expresses sorrow for Spain's lost opportunities and regret for the loss of so many good Spanish citizens. Clearly her sympathies lie with those characters who have used their education, their experience, and their influence to protect citizens of all countries from the excesses of despots of any stripe.



Themes and Characters

Despite the fact that *The Inheritance* introduces the reader to many characters who come in contact with Miguel de Roxas during his travels and adventures in Spain, Italy, France, Austria, and Switzerland, most of the attention centers on Miguel. His development is clearly the focus of the work as he matures from the proud, hotheaded, self-indulgent, and self-centered ladies' man of the early chapters into the respected doctor, husband, and father of the later chapters who can put his life in perspective and who has developed a mature outlook toward friend and foe alike. A Miguel who can say early in the novel that he is "bored by .. .

Spanish matters . . . since he was bent on an Italian career" and who likens the Jews to "bats" for whom he feels "a fleeting, somewhat exasperated compassion" and for whom he has little concern because of the security he feels due to the "flawlessness of the Roxas family tree," understands later what it is like to be pursued by the Inquisition and to be humbled by his adventures.

Miguel must scrounge for food and money, do peasant work in the grape vineyards and the rice fields, and rely on the kindness of strangers for his sustenance and security. His perspective and his sensitivity undergo radical transformation as he broadens his understanding of life and of the philosophical legacy his father has left him.

Veronica (Vrone) Faber is an important secondary character. Vrone exudes strength and vitality. She manages the print shop with intelligence and confidence, surprising Miguel, who has only encountered women who have filled more traditional roles.

Through her, Miguel comes to value the equal partnership and companionship of a woman and changes his views about the importance of physical beauty. It is also through Vrone and her bluntness that he is forced to confront the other important secondary character of the book, his father. Although Miguel's father has died even before the book begins, Von Canon effectively uses the device of Juan de Roxas's biographical manuscript, which he had sent to Master Faber for publication, as the means by which Miguel comes to know his father. Miguel understands more about his father's past life, his relationship with Miguel's mother, his father's self-sacrifice and dedication to Miguel, and his father's 3374 *The Inheritance* attachment to his Jewish mentor, Eleazar Halevy, than he had ever understood as he pursued his self-centered course toward Padua. Miguel had been oblivious to his father's suffering.

As Miguel says, why had he never seen "the world-weariness in the older man's eyes?" No, Miguel corrects himself, "He had seen it, again and again, but .. . he had chosen to ignore it."

The manuscript provides clues which help to answer the central mystery of the novel: How and why did Juan de Roxas come to commit suicide by ingesting aconite in a prison cell of the Spanish Inquisition?



The novel is densely populated with minor characters who add color to the story. Miguel's housekeeper Paca, the devious thief Camacho, the fanatic Padre Domingo, and the scheming Gil de Vega all provide interest. Two minor characters who are particularly well drawn in this novel full of memorable characters are Don Pedro de Talavera, the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor of Spain, and Vitus Trachter, Miguel's friend and fellow student from Padua. The Grand Inquisitor appears as an intelligent and shrewd figure made all the more sinister in his role because he understands what he is doing. He is a man who previously had found intellectual pleasure from new scientific discoveries, but he has now turned his attention to being the medic of Spain, expunging the disease of heresy. He is not operating simply out of religious fanaticism or greed as are several of the other figures in the work. He admires Miguel's education and recognizes Miguel's value for him in Spain. The cardinal also harbors an affection for Miguel partially because of Don Pedro's youthful love for Marguerite Steen, Miguel's mother. Don Pedro demonstrates how even a man of intelligence and education can use barbaric means to further his political ends.

Vitus, Miguel's friend in Padua, serves as a contrast to Miguel. He is hardworking, if not brilliant, and is loyal to Miguel—a loyalty which is not blind, however, to Miguel's callousness early in the novel. Vitus forfeits his life for his friendship with Miguel and forces Miguel to accept responsibility for his friend's death. Miguel makes the difficult decision midway through the novel to meet Vitus's family and the people of the small Austrian village of Schallern who have financed Vitus's expensive medical training and to confess his culpability in Vitus's death.

Vitus's family's stoic reaction also forces Miguel to recognize that nobility of spirit is not the sole province of the aristocracy.

Thematically, the novel revolves around the maturation of Miguel and his attempts to come to grips with his legacy or inheritance as a result of his father's death. These inheritances take several forms. The first dilemma Miguel faces requires him to decide whether to stay in Spain as Don Pedro requests or to defy him by escaping to Padua. If Miguel remains in Spain, he would retain his property and his wealth. As he struggles with his decision, however, he realizes that to stay in Spain would mean to hold his conscience hostage to the terrors of the Inquisition. The legacy of his father's manuscript as well as the memory of his father's commitment to Miguel's medical education in Padua become more important than wealth. Miguel is forced to make choices in the face of hardship concerning what he values the most. Miguel completes his education in Padua and goes back to the legacy of friends and love his father's manuscript has created for him in Basel. In an ironic twist of fate at the end of the novel which underscores not only the perils of living in the sixteenth century but also the perils of being a doctor in the sixteenth century, Miguel appears to have contracted smallpox from Gil de Vega, Don Pedro's scheming and mercenary secretary who has usurped Miguel's home and fortune.

This is one final inheritance. Von Canon does not preserve the reader from the harshness of the time, but she leaves us satisfied with the person Miguel has become.



Topics for Discussion

1. Miguel de Roxas's attachment to Veronica changes from one of friendship and admiration to romantic love.

Trace the change that takes place in their relationship and discuss how and why the change takes place.

2. Miguel seems determined at all costs to return to Padua to complete his medical training. Why is he not willing to remain in Spain and retain his home there?

3. Why is Don Pedro de Talavera, the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor, so generally lenient toward Miguel?

4. Miguel only slowly pieces together the truth surrounding his father's imprisonment and death. Discuss the progression through which he goes in finding out the entire truth.

5. Vron is portrayed as a woman unusual for her time. Discuss her unique position and qualities.

6. Von Canon contrasts the peoples of several European countries, including Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium. What images does she present of each of these cultures?

7. Were you surprised by the ending? Why do you suppose Von Canon chooses to have Miguel contract smallpox?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Inheritance contrasts the differences between medical study in enlightened Padua and the state of medical study in Spain. Characterize the differences and examine how this area reflects the differences in the two cultures.
2. Investigate the historical role of the Spanish Inquisition. What was the purpose of the Inquisition and how did it affect Spain's economy and Spain's relationship with the countries surrounding it?
3. The Inheritance in many ways traces the changes that take place in Miguel as he confronts the questions surrounding his father's death, the challenges of his daring adventures as he makes his way back to Padua, and the intricacies of his relationship with Vron. Trace the changes that take place in Miguel and analyze the causes for these changes.
4. A good historical novel allows us to get to know a time or place better.

Does Von Canon achieve this?

5. The title refers partially to the inheritance from his father that Miguel rejects when he leaves Saragossa. The term may be applied to other aspects of the novel as well. Discuss the ways in which the concept of inheritance or legacy is used in the novel.
6. Examine the role religion plays in the novel.
7. Read Von Canon's other historical novel The Moonclock and compare and contrast the picture presented there of 1683 Vienna with that of Austria and Switzerland a century earlier in The Inheritance.

For Further Reference

Beauregard, Sue-Ellen. Review. Booklist 79 (June 1, 1983): 1270. This reviewer praises Von Canon's feel for period and characterization.

Cianciolo, Patricia. "Yesterday Comes Alive for Readers of Historical Fiction." Language Arts 58 (April 1981): 452-462. Cianciolo discusses the role of the historical novel and praises Von Canon's work.

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilsen. Literature for Today's Young Adults. 2d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1985. This book briefly mentions Von Canon's two novels, with positive comments about her promise as a novelist.

Gordon, Ruth L. Review. The New York Times Book Review 88 (September 4, 1983): 14. Gordon criticizes the characters as one-dimensional and finds the novel unfocused and overly heavy on historical detail.

Heins, Paul. Review. Horn Book Magazine 59 (August 1983): 458-459. Heins admires Von Canon's dialogue, her characterization, and her use of historical background, particularly in the area of medicine.

"Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies (1983)." Social Education 48 (May 1984): 371. This article identifies *The Inheritance* as a notable book under the category of world history and culture.

Sutherland, Zena. *The Best in Children's Books: The University of Chicago Guide to Children's Literature 1979-1984*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986. This guide highly praises *The Inheritance* for its incorporation of historical background and on its excellent characterization.

Wilton, Shirley. Review. School Library journal 30 (September 1983): 140.

This brief review finds *The Inheritance* well-informed, but ultimately slow-paced and burdened by the historical detail.

Related Titles

Both of Von Canon's novels, *The Inheritance* and *The Moonclock*, rely on European settings and the use of the letter as a means of exposition. *The Moonclock*, set in 1683 Vienna, one hundred years after the time of *The Inheritance*, relies more heavily on the epistolary device. Both works are historical novels that recreate their settings with detail and accuracy.



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