

My Brother Michael Short Guide

My Brother Michael by Mary Stewart

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Characters

Camilla Haven, is the heroine and narrator of *My Brother Michael*. At times impulsive, she is nevertheless intelligent in her investigation of Delphi and its secrets. Unlike the other mindless tourists, she has read a great deal about Greece and seeks more than a superficial understanding of its culture and influence. In contrast to Danielle, the femme fatale of the novel, Camilla is sensible and very aware of the importance of manners in sparing the feelings of others and upholding civilized society. Her warm heart and sense of responsibility for others keeps her involved with Simon in Delphi, even though she would be financially better off and physically safer if she left. Perhaps the literary character Camilla is most reminiscent of is Jane Eyre, although Camilla is not mousy and is much more sure of her own self-worth. Although not quite a "liberated" woman, Camilla is one of the good, solid girls who populated women's popular fiction from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Social Concerns

My Brother Michael, written thirteen years after the end of World War II, shows a Europe still unsettled and people still trying to come to terms with what happened to them on a personal level during the war. Simon Lester has come to Greece to find out the truth about his brother who died near Delphi during the war. On a related level, the novel is about personal identity and discovery, another important concern of the post-World War II world. Camilla Haven, the heroine, has come to Greece after breaking off her relationship with dashing but overwhelming Philip. Having been linked for a long time with an overpowering figure, she has little knowledge of herself apart from him. Thus, *My Brother Michael* reflects a need for personal stability on an individual and international level.



Techniques

"Nothing ever happens to me," My Brother Michael begins, and the rest of the novel disproves the heroine's opening statement. Stewart creates suspense in this novel through her characterization. The heroine provides a stable, unmysterious center to the activities.

Each character Camilla encounters has some tension within him or between others and him which Camilla detects but cannot explain, and the subsequent workings out of the plot reveal the characters' motivations. When Camilla first meets Simon, for example, the villagers react with suspicion towards him, yet he seems cool and unruffled.

She later learns that Simon is very much a caring person and that the villagers' hostility is caused by old Communist vs. Allied war wounds.

The novel is, then, an interweaving of characters and their true motivations which only becomes a whole cloth of explanations at the end.

Themes

Stewart combines the ideas of Shakespeare and Donne to create the major theme of *My Brother Michael*: being true to oneself while being involved in mankind. According to the hero Simon, who quotes both Shakespeare and Donne, the really great man sees the pattern of life and his own place in it.

He stands for the ideals which ancient Greece gave to the Western world — "truth, straight thinking, freedom, beauty." While committed to personal growth, Stewart's characters also care for each other, and not only on a romantic basis. Stewart thus wants her books to convey positive, humane values to her readers. In interviews she has clarified her position: "I don't want any one made troubled or unhappy by anything I've written; perhaps 'depressed' and 'hurt' are better words."

She expressed her disgust with the "anti" trend of the 1950s, "all the 'anti' brigade, the dirt brigade, the sicks and the beats." Instead, readers need to be shown "some living pattern of rightness that fits our times."



Key Questions

Stewart is an old hand at writing romance novels, with a career that spans four decades. *My Brother Michael* is one of her early efforts and reflects the era in which it was written. World War II was fought in the previous decade, and it was a watershed event for two or three generations of Americans. Further, the era favored innocent romances and heroines who were strong but not threatening. One way to generate a discussion would be to emphasize a comparison of the themes and characterizations of *My Brother Michael* to more modern romances. Are there significant differences between the issues discussed in Stewart's novel and recent works? Or, if one were to strip away the heavy breathing from sex in the recent works, would the adventures and characters be much the same? If discussion members are devoted readers of romances, this could generate vigorous debate.

1. Does *My Brother Michael* show "some living pattern of rightness that fits our times"?
2. How important are good manners to the themes and plot of the novel? Do Camilla Haven's manners provide a good example of how people should behave toward one another? On the other hand, do they just make her annoying?
3. Is *My Brother Michael* primarily a novel about characters, or is it plot driven? What best sustains suspense in it?
4. What role in the novel does Michael's murder play? Why title the book after Michael?
5. Does the novel's setting play an important role in the development of the plot? Could this romance have been set anywhere else?
6. How does Camilla go about discovering the secrets of the other characters? Does she proceed in an intelligent way? Is she too snoopy?
7. *My Brother Michael* is not particularly sexual when compared with more recent romances. Does this diminish the importance of sex in the novel?
8. Why would men be attracted to Camilla?
9. Has Stewart's approach to her romances changed since she wrote *My Brother Michael*? Compare it to a more recent work such as *Thornyhold* (1983).

Are the women different? Are the themes different? Have the values Stewart conveys changed?

Literary Precedents

Stewart's non-Merlin novels are difficult to classify because they really are not romances, mysteries, or whodunits. Although they have a romantic background, the romance is very understated, especially by more modern standards. They certainly have a strong element of mystery, but it is not as important as other aspects such as the values expounded and the human relationships explored. And the thrust of *My Brother Michael* is not towards who killed Michael, since the murderer has been known for years. Stewart, when asked about the problem of classification, has said, "I'd rather just say that I write novels, fast-moving novels that entertain." Other categories under which critics have tried to place her works include gothic novels, thrillers, and romantic suspense novels.

Related Titles

Although none of Stewart's pretrilogy novels have sequels, they do share similar plot ingredients, heroines, values, and sense of place. Each plot contains adventure, danger, and innocent romance. The heroines are spirited, resolute, and selfless. It is their maturity and commitment that make them attractive to the heroes. The biggest variation in the novels occurs in the setting, from the Isle of Skye for *Wildfire at Midnight* (1956), Corfu for *This Rough Magic* (1964), Austria for *Airs Above the Ground* (1965), to France for *Nine Coaches Waiting* (1958). Although the number of varied settings might tend to make Stewart's novels travelogues, she rises above this temptation, making her settings not only authentic but integral parts of the story.



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