

On Wings of Eagles Short Guide

On Wings of Eagles by Ken Follett

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Characters

Rashid, a young and resourceful Iranian, makes his appearance late in the novel, but is a key character during the escape mission. In keeping with the theme of the novel, Follett centers on Rashid's loyalty to his American friends in Iran.

During his first meeting with Colonel Simons, Rashid is questioned about his dedication to the American prisoners. He proudly explains to the suspicious Colonel, "I am doing everything I can to help my American friends." At that particular time, however, Rashid's only help consists of taking care of four dogs and twelve cats left behind by some American evacuees. Nevertheless, he is prepared to confront the greater challenges Simons has in mind for him during the escape mission.

Rashid's loyalty is thoroughly tested when he is forced to barter with bandits and renegade soldiers near the Turkish border. In each instance, he expertly negotiates with these unfriendly forces; living up to his reputation of being able "to talk his way into and out of anything." Sometimes he even pleads for the American team members while a pistol is aimed at his head. He frequently risks his own life to insure the safety of the mission. In return for his display of courage and loyalty, Perot rewards Rashid by sponsoring his entry into America and offering him employment in his firm.

Another Iranian, Hosain Dadgar, Government Examining Magistrate, is not friendly toward the Americans, and functions as the primary antagonist in Follett's tale because it is he who orders the imprisonment of the two EDS employees, Paul Chipparone and Bill Gaylord. Follett portrays Dadgar as an old guard Iranian official, who is hostile toward all Western intruders and ruthlessly arrogant when challenged by them. Dadgar considers Paul and Bill's escape from prison as a personal insult to his authority and a threat to his reputation as a loyal Iranian.

Dadgar communicates only in Farsi because that is the officially sanctioned language of his country. He refuses to accept any bribes or deals offered by the desperate Americans to obtain their release from prison and remains loyal to Iran even during its revolutionary turmoil. His dedication to duty is clearly evident because when "the whole country [is] falling apart . . .

Dadgar [is] still consulting his book of rules." His finest stroke of strategy when attempting to capture the escaped Americans takes place during the final hours of their journey homeward. Dadgar unexpectedly orders a passport check at the Tehran airport while the passengers are seated on the plane "and none can hide." Although he never actually confronts his prey, Dadgar is, nevertheless, a formidable adversary, who continues to pursue the Americans even when they are only a few miles from the border and their freedom. In a sense, Dadgar possesses the same dogged loyalty to a cause as Simons, but his loyalty is to the wrong side.

Social Concerns

Upon its release in 1983, Follett's novel *On Wings of Eagles* caused some embarrassment to the U.S. State Department's diplomatic corps due to its unfavorable depiction of their actions during the 1979 Iranian crisis. In the novel, representatives of the U.S.

Embassy in Iran, when approached by Perot, refuse to lend their assistance to several of his employees because they mistakenly believe that these men had once bribed Iranian officials. Perot then organizes his own covert operation which circumvents regular diplomatic channels and successfully rescues his men. The novel's central controversy lies in Follett's portrayal of Ross Perot as a "take charge" hero while U.S.

diplomats, including the renowned Henry Kissinger, are painted as inefficient and insensitive bunglers when they attempt to aid Americans imprisoned in Iran.

Techniques

Follett begins *On Wings of Eagles* with a serious preface to inform his readers that his story is "not fictionalization nor a nonfiction novel," but that every event in the book is "what really happened." Indeed, drawn from "more than a hundred hours of taped interviews," the book is a well-researched, well-documented account of an actual escape from Iran, loaded with fascinating foreign intrigue; the escape story is "naturally" suspenseful. This is not to say, however, that Follett avoids using his skills as a master storyteller. In fact, he expertly creates his own synthesis of fact and fiction by combining, in the words of the *Kansas City Star*, "the best of his journalistic skills and his flair for crackling fiction." Follett's ability to weave factual events into a thrilling adventure story accounts for the novel's popular success. *New York Times* reviewer, Hal Goodman, praises Follett for his experimentation in this new literary vein, writing that the novel is "superbly paced" and that "his fans may be reluctant to see him return to fiction."

Themes

Follett's *On Wings of Eagles* stands as a tribute to traditional American values and patriotism. Two major characters, Ross Perot and Arthur Simons, are portrayed as intensely loyal to their families, friends, and country.

Perot, Texas industrialist and founder of Electronic Data Systems Corporation, is not characterized as the typical "greedy, power mad millionaire," but as an exemplary father, loyal to his wife and children, and gravely concerned about his dying mother. Follett reminds readers that if she dies, Perot will "miss her very badly indeed."

Perot also feels personally responsible for his employees and fondly refers to them as "his men." When two of his top executives are imprisoned in Iran, he does not abandon them to their fate as the U.S. State Department would have him do. He adopts, instead, a positive attitude toward their situation.

He indicates that he got them into this predicament, and he is "going to get them out." Perot quickly organizes a rescue squad consisting of his own executives, many of whom are Vietnam veterans due to Perot's patriotic hiring priority. He then enlists retired Colonel "Bull" Simons to lead his commando raid into Iran.

A former Green Beret, Colonel Arthur Simons accepts Perot's proposal because he views the mission as a patriotic obligation. He tells Perot, "This is what Americans are supposed to do for one another." The Bull is the perfect choice for this assignment because during the Vietnam War he led the Son Tay Raid, an attempt to rescue American prisoners of war. For various reasons, the attempt had failed, but Simons had not lost even one of his soldiers and had thereby confirmed his reputation of dependably "bringing all his men back from a mission alive."

The Colonel's patriotism is equalled only by his concern for his family.

When his wife of many years suddenly died of cancer, Simons was deeply grieved, and when his son developed a drug habit, he stood by him until his son had conquered his addiction. This dedication to family values intensifies Simons's willingness to attempt the rescue of Perot's employees —men with worried loved ones of their own.

Adaptations

In 1986, *On Wings of Eagles* was produced by NBC as a two-part television miniseries starring Burt Lancaster as Colonel Bull Simons and Richard Crenna as Ross Perot. The movie closely followed the events in the book except for various touches of Hollywood sensationalism, such as an exploding ammunition dump and a midair helicopter crash. Also, Dadgar is portrayed as a more dangerous and determined villain. In terms of ratings, the miniseries was a three-star (out of four) success.

Literary Precedents

On Wings of Eagles can be compared to other escape narratives such as *The Great Escape* (1950) and *The Midnight Express* (1977). Even *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is a distinguished representative of the genre.

The success of these tales relies heavily upon the public's fascination with and dread of lost liberty. There is magic in a story which pits personal strength against forces organized to deny personal freedom, and when a suspensefilled journey in which the escaped prisoner gambles with his life is part of the tale, the fascination is even greater.

Certain contemporary events can also be mentioned which help to explain the success of Follett's escape tale. The trauma of the Iranian hostage crisis and persistent rumors of American soldiers from Vietnam imprisoned in Southeast Asia have helped the popularity of narratives like Follett's, and *On Wings of Eagles* is most closely allied to books and movies concerned with rescue missions to the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia.

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