

Semper Fi Short Guide

Semper Fi by W. E. B. Griffin

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Characters

In *Semper Fi*, Griffin's characters again largely adhere to broad but definite parameters. Ken "Killer" McCoy is a kid from a rough family in just-as-rough Bethlehem, PA, who seems always to have been a fast riser — into the Corps at eighteen, Corporal after only four years (the interwar promotion rate was very slow for both officers and enlisted personnel), lieutenant only a year later. His best friend, Malcolm "Pick" Pickering, is the grandson of a wealthy hotelier, accomplished in ail the details of the hotel business, son of the owner of a steamship line, and he and McCoy are soul mates, not externally — one is a touchy, tough scrapper, and the other a debonair, insouciant playboy. But both seem born to rise to occasion, as Ken earlier proved through killing three Italian Marines in self-defense, and as they both prove in officer training school. Ellen Feller, wife of an uninspiring (and larcenous) missionary, brings out something new in a Griffin female character — a touch of imperfection. She is in cahoots with her husband in the removal of Chinese artifacts — illegally — from China, and it is significant that on this point McCoy, who has a brief affair with her, does not pass judgment on her. Jack NMI (No Middle Initial) Stecker, the epitome of the perfect Marine senior noncommissioned officer — immaculate, fair, demanding, and regal — for whom, in the novel, a mass of side information — his vehicle, his reputation, his Medal of Honor — substitute for direct description and narrative dialogue in creating his character.

Social Concerns

The novel *Semper Fi* takes place in the year before the attack on Pearl Harbor and follows through the very early days of the war. Social issues, then, are typical of late prewar attitudes. For example, the main character, Kenneth "Killer" McCoy, is stationed in the Marine Corps in China in late 1940. Attitudes toward Chinese and Japanese, as well as toward other Europeans living in China, are shown through McCoy's eyes, particularly the atmosphere of antagonism evident in China before the beginning of the war.

Smaller social commentary and social vignettes are also shown, such a glimpse at the world of the very wealthy in the form of the Pickering and Foster families.

Techniques

Sybil Steinberg, in *Publishers Weekly*, states, in commenting on *Battleground* (1992), that Griffin's prose is an: . . . effective alternative to military fiction's usual foxhole perspective — he places the characters on the fringes, rather than in the thick of the action, skirting familiar events and offering opportunities for exploring the Pacific War's less familiar byways. As he created a framework of coherent subplots and interesting personalities, he reveals WWII arcana, including the principles for establishing travel priorities and the status of enlisted Marine pilots.

This is the most evident element of Griffin's prose — the considerable detail spent on description of the environment in which the characters operate, such that the environment almost becomes a character as well.

Themes

Themes in *Semper Fi* are similar to those in other Griffin novels. Loyalty is especially important, given especially the Marine Corps' tradition as an elite force. The theme of change — rapid and dramatic change — also runs through the novel, be it a readjustment in attitudes (such as the reevaluation of Japanese fighting ability after the Pearl Harbor attack), a change in weapons (Griffin spends considerable time discussing the differences between the Springfield and Garand rifles), a change in status (both McCoy and Master Gunnery Sergeant Jack Stecker are raised from noncommissioned to commissioned rank, and Stecker will be a Brigadier General six novels in the series later).



Key Questions

Griffin introduces characters who are not as clearly "good" or "bad" as those in *The Aviators* (1988). As they cross the line between admirability and questionable behavior — or in the case of the coward and bully Lieutenant Macklin, despicability — their behavior, reactions, and attitudes and beliefs draw into focus the way we react to them as well as the things they react to; we as readers either mirror their reactions or recoil from them.

1. Describe the attitude toward Chinese in the novel. How is it different from the attitude toward Europeans? Is it xenophobic?
2. Why do you think Lieutenant Macklin and others disregard McCoy's advice regarding the Japanese troops and their plans to spy on them?
3. Describe the character of Lieutenant Macklin. What is his function in the novel? Is he a flat or a round character?
4. Are there really any round characters in the novel, or are they all, to a certain extent, flat?
5. Is Corporal McCoy's killing of the Italian marines justified? If so, why or how?
6. What are the similarities between Malcolm "Pick" Pickering and Ken McCoy? What are the differences? To what extent are the differences and similarities a function of the characters' respective environments? Why do they get along so well together?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

All of Griffin's books fit within a long tradition of twentieth-century military fiction; more specifically, Griffin has precedents in writers such as C. S. Forester, author of the Horatio Hornblower series; Douglas Reeman, author of a number of British seafaring novels, most treating the Second World War; and Max Hennessy, author of trilogies about the British cavalry and the RAF. In the work of all these authors, the protagonists are men who know themselves when put in positions of command. All these authors as well treat the relationships between the men in war. Perhaps most obviously, though, Griffin and the above-mentioned authors share a liminal connection to the modern "techno-thrillers" of Tom Clancy, Dale Brown, Stephen Coonts, and others. All provide a look into the technique of war — not simply the workings of a nuclear submarine (or an eighteenth-century man-of-war, or an Army helicopter) but of the techniques of making war, the techniques of living as a warrior, and the interactions of warriors. Like these other authors, Griffin provides considerable detail regarding the arcana of war, be it uniforms, aircraft, protocol, attitudes, or history. Unlike Forester's Hornblower, however, Griffin's characters are not long tormented by what they must do as soldiers; they do their jobs and move on.



Related Titles

Through the Corps series (Semper Fi, 1986; Call to Arms, 1987; Counterattack, 1990; Battleground, 1992, Line of Fire, 1992; Close Combat, 1992; Honor Bound, 1994) we see the development of a large number of officers and men; there are considerably more characters who are given some development than in the Brotherhood of War (1983-1988) or Badge of Honor (1988-1995) series. The focus shifts between novels; for example, in the latest novel in the series the action takes place in Argentina, not Europe or the Pacific, and few of the previously major characters — the McCoy brothers, the Pickerings (father and son) among them — are featured prominently. Other venues for action in the series include Australia, Guadalcanal, the U.S., and New Guinea. Some characters rise through the military hierarchy, such as Stecker and Pick's father Fleming Pickering.



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