Shining Through Short Guide

Shining Through by Susan Isaacs

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

As the novel Shining Through opens, Linda Voss, the protagonist, seems to be a typical 1930s working girl. She worries about her alcoholic mother and spends lunch hours gossiping with the other secretaries, trying to conceal her crush on her handsome boss. But, like Isaacs's other female protagonists, she is witty, irreverent, and aware of her own sexuality. When war propels her into the midst of momentous events, she discovers her own inner resources and courage (which she deprecatingly calls foolhardiness).

The two men in her life, members of the Wall Street law firm where she works, handle levers of power which influence the entire nation. Through Linda's eyes, however, they are shown as vulnerable human beings. John Berringer, whom she marries, seems truly gifted by the gods; his intelligence, charm, and good looks impress everyone he meets. Only gradually does Linda — and the reader — discover the obsession which makes him unable to love. Edward Leland, an aristocrat and World War I hero who has the trust of the president himself, at first intimidates Linda. As the story proceeds she comes to know him as a man whose bravery and humane concern shows his true nobility to be of the spirit.

Many other characters touch Linda's life during the course of the novel.

Almost all of them are developed at least two-dimensionally, rather than being mere stereotypes.

Social Concerns/Themes

Shining Through tells the barely credible tale of an obscure "old-maid" legal secretary, who volunteers for a hazardous spy mission to Nazi Germany. She carries it out successfully — shining through — to find both safe haven in Switzerland and true love waiting for her at the end of the novel. The book thus mixes major elements from several different genres.

The romance motif holds the perennial appeal of the Cinderella story, but in a version shaped to the lost innocence of the twentieth century. It is not enough for this heroine to be beautiful and deserving; she must also prove herself in a harrowing ordeal before the happy ending is attained. Her previous marriage to a man who outwardly has all the attributes of the handsome prince, but who cannot love her, adds another nonstandard twist.

Linda Voss's adventures in wartime Germany not only provide excitement and suspense in the tradition of the spy novel but they offer the added satisfaction of a brave protagonist and a just cause. The Nazi regime's evil is vividly portrayed in the many brief episodes of disappearances and torture. Linda's part-Jewish identity increases the danger she faces. It also provides oblique commentary on the bigotry of the era, since even in America it makes her unwelcome in some circles.

Both the New York-Washington and the Berlin segments of the novel reflect much of the texture of ordinary life during the World War II years. As a story which provides the vicarious adventure of a historical novel, along with a glimpse of events which most of its readers' parents or grandparents lived through, the book has a unique appeal.

Finally, before Linda's entry into the world of intrigue, she works as a secretary and then lives as the "outsider" wife of a privileged Wall Street lawyer.

These segments give an in-depth look at two settings which might be pictured as mere "ordinary life" in many types of fiction. Here those settings are shown to be equally as rich in the cross-currents of suspicion, masked identities, and sudden disaster as are the halls of power on either side of the Atlantic. Besides providing ongoing developments which put her in "the right place at the right time" to take on the espionage assignment, these episodes illustrate that similar human reactions and political machinations must be coped with no matter what the milieu.

Techniques

Isaacs uses first-person narration throughout the novel. This intensifies the horror and anxiety of Linda's experiences in wartime Berlin; the reader feels the dislocation and fear almost as immediately as the narrator does.

Like Isaacs's previous novels, Shining Through exuberantly mixes story-lines and formulas. It borrows "action" and suspense elements from the espionage novel, but its protagonist is an amateur, and is both more ethical and less prone to heroics than such culture-idol spies as James Bond.

As a historical novel it aims to place its characters in a plausible setting and situation, rather than to show them as participants in "Great Events." The Normandy invasion is the only actual military operation referred to, and its impact in the story is offstage and indirect.

As a love story, Shining Through rather resembles the modern Gothic romance in keeping both reader and heroine guessing about which man in her life will be worthy of her. It also has a mysterious and injured hero, a frequent feature in Gothic romances from the Bronte sisters' works to the present. However, it lacks a stately or haunted house, a brooding atmosphere, and several other elements of the Gothic genre.

Adaptations

Shining Through was excerpted in the Ladies Home Journal for September 1988.

The film rights were acquired by Columbia, and the movie Shining Through was released in 1992. The screenplay was written by David Seltzer, who also directed the film. Melanie Griffith starred as Linda Voss, with Michael Douglas as Edward Leland, the spy-network director. The movie changed many plot elements of the novel. By and large it was not a big success, and its reviews were almost uniformly unfavorable. National Review's critic attacked it with savage humor, ending by wishing for "one touch of realism in the film — . . . a talking dog or a cameo by Barbra Streisand as Frau Goring." Almost alone among the reviewers, Peter Travers in Rolling Stone praised it as "an awful lot of fun," with Griffith and Douglas exchanging witty dialogue in 1930s comedy style as a prelude to seduction.

Key Questions

In her focus on ordinary people caught in extraordinary situations — and coming out ahead — Isaacs's novels present a generally optimistic view of life. She is also a sharp observer of contemporary mores and typical problems of an era. For this reason the books hold up a provocative mirror to each of the decades that they're set in, as well as to concerns in some readers' lives.

1. Shining Through has been criticized for the implausibility of its spy drama: that a hastily trained ex-secretary could function successfully as a spy in Nazi Germany, for example. Do you find this a fair criticism? Does it make any difference to readers' enjoyment of the book? Should it?

2. The first two-thirds of Shining Through is devoted to Linda Voss's life as a legal secretary and dutiful daughter, and then to her subtly disappointing marriage. The action plot in the final third is almost a second, and different, novel. This structure is unusual, and difficult for most authors to sell to either publishers or readers.

Why does it work here? What other novels break with a single-story structure in this way?

3. Isaacs's success with her novels has not been repeated in her movie-related projects. Is she just the victim of bad luck on the latter? Or are there crucial elements in her fiction that do not translate well to the screen?

4. Isaacs's novels have been grand commercial successes. Critics tend to disparage Susan Isaacs as just an author of popular tales with pretensions to being a serious writer. Does it matter where a novel falls on the continuum between "formula fiction" and "real literature"? Where would you place Isaacs's works on this scale?

Related Titles/Literary Precedents

In looking at Isaacs' first four novels, some interesting patterns begin to emerge. Perhaps "non-patterns" would be a better description, because two are patterns of surprise rather than predictability.

Shining Through draws on a variety of genres to put together a unique story, a technique Isaacs used successfully in her previous books. With each new novel the surprise lies in which genres' traditions are used and how they are combined to come up with "something different" from other works in the various categories.

A second attribute found in at least one of Isaacs's other novels is a somewhat eccentric pattern of pacing or story structure. In Almost Paradise (1984) the female protagonist dies unexpectedly just when a happy ending seems to be foreshadowed. Shining Through devotes the first two-thirds of its pages to office politics and domestic drama before shifting tone and pace to become a spy tale.

All of Isaacs's major female characters have a healthy sense of humor which sees beneath surface appearances. Their wry observations are among the most entertaining features of the novels. These women also share an honest and straightforward interest in sex and their own satisfaction in amorous matters. Combining this trait with the traditional morality of a halfcentury ago may seem implausible to some readers, but the author does so convincingly.

Isaacs seems destined to develop as a writer by expanding the scope of her material. The one fairly reliable prediction that can be made about her future projects is that she will continue to delight her readers.

Copyright Information

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