

Something of Value Short Guide

Something of Value by Robert Ruark

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Characters

Something of Value focuses on Peter, the son of a land-owning white settler, and Kimani, the son of a Kikuyu chief. When it begins, they are fifteen-year-old foster-brothers and best friends. Peter had been cared for as an infant by Kimani's mother after his own mother's death. Now they play war games together. However, because he is white, Peter expects the deference which Kimani is loathe to give. When Peter's future brother-in-law Jeff slaps Kimani for insolence, Kimani believes his family may be cursed. When his father and two of his father's wives are jailed for infanticide, he is certain of this and attempts to kill Jeff in order to remove the curse.

He then flees, and after some experience with petty crime, becomes a Mau Mau leader who eventually kills Jeff and two of his children. He severely wounds Jeff's wife, leaving her for dead. Kimani is presented as a weak, half savage creature, who is led into terrorism for lack of strong guidance from either the elders of his family, from whom he is separated, or from the white man. He has no political principles and kills only out of envy and hatred of the white man.

Peter, on the other hand, is handsome, intelligent and good. He is an excellent hunter, the best leader of safaris in Africa. Even his faults, drinking too much in Nairobi and engaging in mindless sexual activity with the women who are always throwing themselves at him, are what might be considered manly peccadillos. He is terribly macho, yet elegant, as good a fighter as he is a ballroom dancer.

He marries the woman he has loved since childhood and plans to devote himself to farming, but he is recalled from his honeymoon when he is notified of the slaughter of his sister's family by Kikuyu terrorists. The Mau Mau uprising has begun.

Peter hunts the Mau Mau with the same ferocity they exhibit, but he is sickened by the violence and his own brutality comes close to destroying him. He drinks too much; his wife leaves him. When he nearly murders an acquaintance of his wife, he realizes that only a return to hunting in the African wilderness can save him. This time, Kimani will be his prey. He kills Kimani with his bare hands but refuses to kill Kimani's baby son. Instead he brings the baby boy back to civilization to be raised by his sister with her own newborn baby. Presumably, these babies may bring about a better world.

Peter's father, Henry MacKenzie, may be the most interesting character in the book. He has worked excruciatingly hard and suffered great hardships, including the loss of his beloved wife, in order to establish a farm in Africa. He has learned a great deal, however, including a respect for African traditions and magic, which he uses when necessary.

Kimani's father, Karanja, is wise too, but he is faithful to the ways of his tribe and cannot live when the white man insists he disobey these laws. The white government jails him for abetting an infanticide which he believed was necessary and he dies from the tuberculosis he contracts in prison. His death, like the deaths of other tribal leaders



either of old age or at the hands of a foolish and imperceptive white government, paves the way for the Kikuyu leadership to be dominated by savage terrorists.

The women in this novel count for very little. The white women are either staunch helpmates on the African farm or vehicles of corruption in Nairobi.

The Kikuyu women are depicted as being perfectly content with their state of semislavery.



Social Concerns

Ruark loved Africa, its landscape, its animals and its people. The plight of those people, black natives and white settlers, disturbed him greatly. He believed that the white man had robbed the tribesmen of their traditional culture and given them nothing of value with which to replace it. Wise white settlers used the Kikuyu and Masai customs to ensure a settled and productive life for the natives, but government bureaucrats, well-meaning yet ignorant do-gooders, and London politicians undid their efforts.

According to Ruark, the African, bereft of his traditions, and still savage at heart had come to envy the material wealth of the white man and hoped to wrest it from him by violence. He then became prey to Communist and other anti-British agitators such as the Indians who organized and funded his rebellion.

Out of their love for secret societies, according to Ruark, the Kikuyu formed the Mau Mau conspiracy to kill and torture both white people and blacks who refused to endorse mayhem.

Ruark justifies the brutal tactics of the white settlers as necessary for the defense of their wives, their children and their homes. However, the atrocities they are forced to perform destroy their own lives. The paradise that had been Kenya, Ruark believes, has been turned into a slaughterhouse.

Ruark denies he is a racial bigot and does point out that however horrifying their culture, the African natives did live in harmony with their environment. He believes, though, that it is the white man's duty and burden to civilize the black man and to keep him under careful supervision until this is accomplished, if it ever is. He seems to find it impossible to conceive of honest, effective, government under black rule in the foreseeable future.

Techniques

Ruark dramatizes action very effectively. The reader is made to feel a participant in everything from a Kenyan wedding reception to an elephant hunt to ritual torture and murder. The narration is straightforward and exciting which creates and sustains suspense. The dialogue seems plausible enough and the characters are just realistic enough to keep the reader's sympathy although they do tend toward extremes of villainy or heroism.

Ruark is an accomplished journalist who presents facts accurately and describes events with great skill. Using language sparsely but graphically, he brings the landscape alive — in the wilderness, on the farms and in the city. He also manages to describe with great clarity what it means to live in a country beset by civil war.

Themes

The relationship between life and death in the wild as mediated by the hunter concerns Ruark. He notes that the lion shot by the hunter for sport provides a trophy for the white man, meat for the natives, and food for the hyenas and the vultures. Their leavings enrich the earth. The earth nourishes the vegetation on which the smaller animals, killed and used for bait with which to attract the lion, feed. Life and death are intertwined and interdependent.

Ruark also believes in the healing quality of the wilderness and the nobility of hunting. Cities, which are dominated by women, corrupt a man. In the wilderness, a man can purify himself and become almost godlike through suffering hardship while devoting himself to the hunt. Hunting itself serves to weed out the unfit and keep the animal population manageable, thus insuring not only the survival of the species but the improvement of the breed. Ruark insists that the environment must be respected and that ecologically sound practices must be maintained.

Indeed, ecologically sound practices must be applied to people as well as to nature. In Africa before the white man came, the population was controlled by constant warfare between the tribes, endemic disease, and periodic natural disasters such as drought. The white man prevented war between the tribes, mitigated disease and natural disaster and so caused overpopulation, urbanization, poverty, social unrest, and crime.

If there are any solutions to these problems, they must be implemented, Ruark believes, by white men who know the land and its people. Because of the forces of history, and the foolishness of those who do not understand Africa, the novel holds out only the faintest glimmer of hope that solutions will be found.

Adaptations

In 1957, after paying \$300,000 for the film rights, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios made *Something of Value* into a film starring Rock Hudson as Peter, and Sidney Poitier as Kimani. It was praised by critics for the stars' performances and its evenhandedness; Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* thought it just missed being a great motion picture. He faulted it for its sentimentality and conventionality. To him, it appeared too similar to an ordinary cowboy and Indian movie, and he also believed that too much of the film was shot in a studio rather than in the wild, thus accentuating its lack of realism.

Literary Precedents

In his use of the African setting, in his appreciation of the great white hunter, in his pared down literary style, Ruark is the heir of Hemingway.

Not only in his writing, but in his style of living, he attempted to emulate his literary hero. His style differs from that of Hemingway in its more graphic depictions of violent actions, an approach used by such writers as William Burroughs. His writing is certainly in the tradition of the novelists who wrote about World War II, such as Norman Mailer and James Jones.

His social philosophy has been compared to that of Ayn Rand, in its insistence on the privileges and responsibilities of the strong man. His literary techniques, as well as his interest in contemporary society, have been compared to that of John O'Hara. His belief in the moral and educative value of hunting is very similar to that of William Faulkner. To Ruark, as well as to Faulkner, a boy becomes a man when he makes his first difficult kill.



Related Titles

Uhuru (1962) shares the setting and concerns of *Something of Value*. Ruark's hero, Brian Dermott, like Peter McKenzie, a white hunter whose marriage has failed, believes the whites of Kenya should resist its independence and the consequent domination of the government by blacks. "Uhuru" means freedom. To Dermott, and the white settlers who share his point of view, Kenyan independence is more frightening than the Mau Mau uprising which had taken place several years earlier. Other whites, such as Dermott's Aunt Charlotte, welcome independence; still others hate and fear it but they feel it is useless to resist and plan to return to England.

Ruark believes that the African leaders are inept, cynical, and self-aggrandizing villains who will destroy Kenya if they are allowed to rule. He would thwart their struggle for independence, even if it meant abrogating the rule of law and resorting to violence, fighting the black man's terrorism with an even more brutal counterterrorism.

This is an exciting novel with distinctive characters. It gains plausibility because it reflects Ruark's familiarity with the East African landscape and with Kenyan life or at least with the life lived by Kenya's whites. Obviously, Ruark loves the land, but has little faith in its people.



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