# Whirlwind Short Guide

## Whirlwind by James Clavell

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# Characters

Clavell's Iranian characters illustrate how each segment of that society attempts to use the accession to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Their fate reflects the fate of Iran. Very early in the novel, Kyabi, the educated professional who wants nothing more than democracy and prosperity for Iran, is killed by a mob urged on by a mullah, or religious leader, Hussain Kowissi.

Kyabi's son, a university student who supports the overthrow of the Shah in favor of a socialist democracy, is appalled to learn of his father's murder and to witness the imposition of a theocracy that denies human rights. He dies trying to assassinate the mullah who had his father killed. The plight of the mullah's wife is described sympathetically. Old before her time because of poverty and abuse, she is without rights and without hope under the new regime. The Bakravans and their colleagues are millionaire businessmen who support the Ayatollah partly out of religious conviction but mostly out of a desire to increase their already enormous wealth and power. They are shown to be thoroughly immoral monsters who have no loyalty to anyone, including members of their own families. Some are executed by the new regime, but most live on and prosper.

Abdollah Khan, the semibarbaric ruler of the primitive area of Iran near the Turkish border, is rich and ruthless. Playing the secret services of Iran, Russia, England, and the United States off one another, his only loyalty is to himself. His daughter Azadeh and his son and heir Hakim are helpless against him. Indeed, all Iranian women are helpless except as they can use their wiles to influence their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Their ignorance and naivete leads them to exaggerate their power.

Sharazad, the beautiful young wife of Tom Lochart, a helicopter pilot, brings on her own destruction and that of her English husband, because of her unjustified faith in her family, the Bakravans, and in her own powers. Her support of the Ayatollah and her refusal to leave Iran cause her to lose everything. Her foil, Azadeh, is more intelligent and pluckier. Her determination to leave her country, no longer habitable by any right-thinking human being, saves her life and that of her husband.

The non-Iranian characters are more sympathetic, but they too are based on stereotypes. Lochart is typical of those Westerners who embrace the customs of an exotic land. He falls in love with an Iranian woman, prefers Iranian food, and adopts Iranian customs.

Eventually, he converts to Islam. Fate destroys him.

Jean-Luc is the quintessential Frenchman who cares only for fashionable clothing, excellent cooking, and beautiful women. Scragger is the tough Australian pilot with a heart of gold.

Erikki is the giant Finn who is gentle until those he loves are threatened.

MacIver runs a helicopter company under the direction of Andrew Gavillan who is fighting to retain his place in the firm of Noble House. Aided by his loyal British wife Gen, MacIver risks his life to save his men and his company. The British are essentially noble and good even when, like Armstrong the super secret agent, they must torture and kill in order to save what remains of the British Empire, if not the free world.

# Social Concerns/Themes

W hirlwind tries to make sense of one of the most apparently senseless phenomena of recent times, the Iranian retreat from rationalism, prosperity, and modernity caused by the overthrow of the Shah. With the accession to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the country returned to stultifying religious fundamentalism, systematic denial of individual rights, and hopeless poverty. Why would a country return to the dark ages? Even more incredibly, why would those people with the most to lose — women, students, and businessmen — support such atavism?

Clavell methodically demonstrates why the clergy supported the Ayatollah Khomeini — to institute Islamic orthodoxy and to increase the power of their leaders. He also explains that businessmen supported Islam, primarily because they were totally corrupt and believed that social change would not harm them. Even the secularly oriented urban middle-class professionals, military officers, students, and women were blinded by hatred of the Shah and a deep suspicion of foreigners. In their naivete, they believed they could control the Islamic fundamentalists and expected democracy to triumph once the Shah was overthrown.

Of course, they underestimated the power of the mullahs to dominate the unenlightened masses. Clavell, always an excellent teacher, clarifies a muddled situation as he explains the triumph of Ayatollah Khomeini.

As in all his novels, Clavell also attempts to explain the philosophic and moral differences between East and West. In his view, the English, Americans, and Canadians are honorable but naive; Moslems are religious, but care nothing for human life, and the Japanese are highly competent, but care only for victory — in business now, rather than warfare as in the past. He also condemns the ineptitude of the Carter administration, as well as the Western governments that supported the Ayatollah and enabled his success.

# Techniques/Literary Precedents

Clavell focuses on a group of people connected with a joint British-Iranian company that provides helicopter transportation, primarily to oil fields, and shows how the overthrow of the Shah affects them, their loved ones, and their enemies. The cast of characters is very large. Danger stalks each one, but nearly all the principal characters, at least the Europeans, manage to survive. Help generally arrives in the nick of time.

Often the reader is told that whatever seems to have happened — a kidnapping, a secret murder, even a business deal — either was not what it seemed to be, or was planned to happen that way. Psychological and spiritual changes of heart, however, are signalled by rather obvious symbolism.

For example, Lochart's sleeping on an Iranian bed rather than a European bed suggests that he will accept Islam.

The events of the novel are wildly implausible but exciting, absorbing the reader in the heat of several chases.

The chases themselves often involve helicopters, but some are treks across icy mountain passes and others involve driving and hiking through native villages. Automobiles and helicopters are forever running out of fuel and villagers are always hostile, but one never doubts for a moment that those characters necessary for the continuance of the series will survive.

Clavell's technique of leaving one group of characters in dire straits to focus on another, may be traced back to the serializations of novels which were so popular during the second half of the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens, especially, was a most accomplished practitioner of the cliff-hanger technique. Clavell's characterizations, too, are Dickensian; the villains particularly are memorable even though they tend to be one-dimensional. The reader does not easily forget Hakim Khan who claimed that he wanted to be a musician but who becomes almost as cruel a ruler as the father who nearly had him killed.

Clavell's technique is cinematic in that he is interested in what a scene looks like and what his characters do, rather than what they may be thinking.

Indeed, his characters' interior monologues are far less effective than their dialogue or their nefarious or courageous deeds. Character, he believes, is revealed in action. Exciting action is the hallmark of his novels.

# Related Titles

Whirlwind continues the series Clavell began with Tai-Pan (1966), which told of the origins of Noble House in 1841. This trading company based in Hong Kong has now become a multinational conglomerate, which secretly owns Maclver's Iranian helicopters. Its future hinges on their recovery as the worthy Andrew Gavillan and the shifty usurper Linbar Struan struggle to control its destiny. Armstrong, the British superagent last seen in Hong Kong in the novel Noble House (1981), is in Whirlwind, still trying to save the last vestiges of the British Empire from the Chinese, the Russians, and from itself.

Clavell himself calls his novels parts of an "Asian Saga," which also includes King Rat (1962) and Shogun (1975).

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