

Minutes Dec. 2019

Kaffen

The December meeting of the Novel Club convened on the 3rd at the lovely Cleveland Heights home of Linda Strandhaus and Roland Philip. Delicious appetizers were served in the dining room along with a nice selection of wine. After a quick joyous gathering, Louise Mooney called the meeting to order in the living room.

After thanking the hosts, guests were introduced. From Chicago came guest of Tricia Smith, Diane Senofski. Peter Haas brought his wife, Leigh Haas, and Joe and Carol Peters attended as guests of Tom Slavin.

Following the introduction of guest, we had a quick report from our trusty treasurer: The Novel Club has a balance of 1500 dollars. All bills have been paid, but 5 members haven't paid dues as of yet.

Peter Haas reported on membership. We currently have 33 members, and the Peters are to join, pending paperwork. Should Leigh Haas decide to join, we will be up to our ideal of 36.

Art Stupay brought up the idea of starting meetings earlier than 7:45, suggesting 7:00 as a reasonable start time. Some objections were voiced such as those who go out to dinner before the meeting having to rush dinner. Others felt it would be easier to meet earlier in order to get home earlier. In the end there was no consensus. In general people were supportive of the idea but not ready to make an official change. It was noted that hosts are able to make this decision, and we can try it if the hosts decide to do so, and a committee could be formed to discuss the issue. The idea of earlier start time remains open.

Jay Siegal then proposed a motion to purchase a cordless mike in order for all to better hear the presenters. Most in attendance agreed that this is a good idea, but that we need a specific item to vote on. James Sanders agreed to research the best mike to purchase and he will present his research at January meeting. We will take the issue up again in January.

After this discussion, we got to the heart of the matter. Tricia Smith presented the biography of Alan Paton, author of our book Cry the Beloved Country. Paton was born in 1903 to evangelical parents in South Africa. His background as an academic helped the character Kumalo ring true.

In interviews Paton has said he wrote this book in the grip of two powerful emotions; Racial disparities and yearning for social justice, which is clear from reading the book. Tricia set the book in context for us with a quick history, which included a printed timeline, of apartheid. The timeline included international reaction to the harsh regime, notably the US' support of the inhumane system until the mid 1980s.

The book has been made into 2 movies, and 1 Broadway play. Paton's themes resonate through additional novels as well, but this is the best known. He has received international recognition-Freedom Medal honored for living within maelstrom and keeping the world aware. This background proved helpful to place the story in history and gave a solid foundation for our subsequent conversation.

Toby Siegal followed with a thoughtful and thorough critical paper. She found the lyrical language transfixing, his short clipped sentences conveyed so much, about family and questions of morality. She noted that Kumalo was compelling, as his innocence was shattered through the

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change in culture from village to city. She placed the story in history, as thousands of natives came to the city in pursuit of lost rights.

As far as theme, she saw the theme of inequality as important, but not overused in a glaring manner. She compared the conflicted relationship between Kumalo and his sister Gertrude to that of Cain and Abel, and noted that there are several connections with the bible contained in the work. Both of these papers are worth reading if you missed the meeting, and are available on the website.

Toby then provided questions for discussion. The first question was about Biblical references. Many members of the group found plenty of biblical references. For one, it felt linguistically like the bible. The book contains references to promised land, the prodigal son, Cain and Abel. The reference to Absalom, son of David, was also mentioned. Also, there was Jarvis' journey, likened to St. Paul's journey, as well as the suffering of Job. The prostitute was forgiven, as were women in similar circumstances in the bible. To sum up: in tone and theme this book read a lot like the Bible to many people.

The next question was about paradoxes contained within the story. One main paradox was that the man who is killed was just. Kumalo represents the classic paradox: Why do good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people? Finally, at the end of the novel, Kumalo goes up the mountain. He and the reader expect big things, but nothing changes. Another comment was about the paradox of the father, Jarvis, getting to know his son only after his son's death.

The question about the relationship between Rev Kumalo and Msimangu gave rise to a broad discussion of white/black relationships, emotional ties to country, and even touched on mass incarceration of black people in America. Toby reigned the discussion in before it went too far afield. Those who wished were encouraged to take it up again over drinks after the meeting.

The next question concerned characters and their flaws. Where did they falter? One main point was that the fathers don't really understand their sons. Also, Kumalo's sister Gertrude can't go back to village even after she is seemingly away from her former life. She felt like returning was what she wanted, but in the end she didn't want to go back. Another flaw was in the justice system, that the judge discounts everything and hands down a sentence according to the law, even though it may not be justice.

Finally, we discussed Paton's vision of the world. His closeness to the Bible was discussed as it informed his morality. He looked forward to a time when Black people controlled their own destiny. Many readers felt that while the topic is painful, Paton's writing has hope and is uplifting.

Under Toby's direction, discussion moved along efficiently, and we adjourned by 10:00 for more treats and casual discussion. The book was well received and all members offered thoughtful comments about the book and the world portrayed therein.