

THE SHALLOW SEA

Neil Ruzic (1992)

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The novel "The Shallow Sea" is a narrative which pits the main character Grant North, an American, against the government, and ultimately the prime minister of a third world country, The Bahamas.

Grant North has set up what he calls an "Island for Science" on which he intends to breed shrimps and to establish a "Think Tank", but he cannot obtain the necessary permits in order to go into business. Despite this, he has set up the shrimp farm, hiring Bahamians to assist with the project.

He has a teenaged daughter who is kidnapped by a Defence Force Officer and she is gone for a year or so, appearing in the story only at the beginning and at the end. No reason is given for the kidnapping and no details emerge as to where she is held for that long period of time, how she was treated, how she survived.

The Defence Force captain is called St. Gregory and he is a white Bahamian, described by the author as a "necrophiliac" and "psychopath".

The prime minister is called Charles T. Ransom and he is given a "wall eye" by the author, to render his portrayal more pointedly, in case readers miss the purpose of the narrative.

Implausible and cliched situations are a part of the narrative: Grant North falls in love, reciprocally, with the prime minister's daughter Marianne (a recovered drug addict), a defence force officer commits suicide because he believes that he killed Grant North's daughter during an attack on the boat carrying her, except North's daughter was not killed. No explanation is offered as to the identity of the girl the defence force officer threw into the sea, mistakenly thinking she was North's daughter. Charles Ransom was married to a Haitian voodoo priestess and Captain St. Gregory holds the high rank of commodore or captain on the Defence Force. All of these situations are implausible, given the realities of Bahamian society.

The Prime Minister and his Cabinet are portrayed as corrupt or as figures of derision. North is portrayed as an idealist, bringing light where before, (from his viewpoint), there was only darkness. North is concerned with assigning blame very early in the narrative. On page 125 of a novel 536 pages in length, he reminds himself that "St. Gregory was only a minor piece, it was the King he was after" and on page 145, "never have I bought the idea... under his command".

The story is dense with detail and is told in the third person narrative. The authorial voice is intrusive, and it often comes through in the actions of Grant North.

The author's use of metaphor and simile is extensive and largely negative and racist. For example, "...but their black faces and hands melted into the night as if headless sailor suits had been stuck on the stanchions for a joke"; "... like the archfiend who gassed people by the millions, St. Gregory would have been ... to define his authority"; "... as if he were some animal lower in the evolutionary scale than a private and had missed the genetic acquisition of facial muscles". The Defence Force is compared to the Tonton Macoute. All descriptions of Cabinet members are derogatory and demeaning. The marriage of Charles Ransom to a voodoo priestess is representative of the alleged alliance between obeah and politics in The Bahamas. In fact, the author has nothing positive to say about life in The Bahamas.

Aside from the main characters, there is a host of secondary characters, none of whom are identifiable as Bahamians.

It is obvious that Mr. Ruzic did some research prior to beginning this novel and it is also obvious that he talked to Bahamians in order to write his story. There are some misinterpretations of this history so gained, a few hyperboles which are recognizable as the perceptions and misperceptions of members of the opposition party prior to 1992.

In the end, North decides to destroy the house and material possessions of the Prime Minister whom he blames for the lack of permits and the disappearance of his daughter. In a hackneyed chain of events, Charles Ransom is killed by a dose of cocaine which was hidden in a medical kit, and administered by Sidney Rolle who thought that it was penicillin. This entire scene is one of the most implausible in the narrative and lessens the impact of the ending which is supposed to be dramatic, an ending where the "bad" gets his reward as do the "good", that is the "bad" dies and the victims (good) live.

As hard as it tries, this novel is not representative of Bahamian life and society. It is also insightful of a school of thought amongst first world investors who come into the developing country to run things in their own way and who show disrespect for whatever has been achieved so far by the natives. Often they perceive themselves to be above the law.

REVIEWER

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