

The Cay, by Theodore Taylor

Book Review by Stephen Butler

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Author

Theodore Taylor is an American writer who also makes documentary films. His inspiration to write 'The Cay' came from his research into German submarines that fought in the Second World War. He is now married with three children and lives in California.

Setting

This novel is set in the 1940's on a small island, called a 'cay', in the Caribbean Sea. German U-boats are constantly submerged in the vicinity of the island and Williamsted, Phillip's home, which is a Dutch colonised island.

Theme

One of the main themes in this novel is racism. Phillip sees Negroes in the same way as his mother despises them. Phillip likes the black peoples' accents and the way they throw fruit at them from their boats. His friends like them too, but for some reason his mother thinks they are dirty and unpleasant. Throughout the novel Phillip begins to recognise that Negroes are ordinary people who should have the same rights as whites and he decides to ignore his mother's prejudices and respect the people with dignity.

Plot

Phillip lives in Williamsted with his mother and father. They had lived in the United States but they moved there when Phillip's father was offered a job in an oil refinery nearby. Williamsted is very quaint and the harbour is always full of black people on their fishing boats, called schooners. One day a German U-boat is spotted near the harbour. The whole harbour is on edge. When everyone calms down, the first tanker in a week sets sail with gallons of crude oil on board. The whole population is shocked when the tanker blows into pieces and scatters shrapnel all over the sea. Phillip's mother becomes anxious and she brings Phillip on a small cargo ship back to Central America. Phillip's father thinks that they will be alright. The ship is torpedoed the next morning, and when Phillip awakes he finds himself on a raft.

Phillip had been unconscious for several hours and now he is out in the middle of the sea with an ugly black man, and no mother. The Negro's name is Timothy, he is old but very strong. Phillip goes to sleep and when he awakes he finds that he is unable to see, he is blind. Phillip thinks that Timothy is strict when he would not give him any water but he realises that Timothy is sensible with the rations and he decides to make friends with him. The island is deserted and it is surrounded by a coral reef, the only way people would notice them is by air. So, Timothy sets to work and he builds a hut and a bonfire which they could light if they heard an aircraft approaching. Timothy fishes in the pools and on some days he would even catch lobster.

Weeks pass and not a single aeroplane flies over their heads. Timothy catches a fever and his life is in danger. Phillip nurses him back to health but he will never regain his full strength. Timothy realises that he will not be around for much longer and he shows Phillip how to move about the island with the use of vines as guidelines. Phillip learns quickly and soon he is able to fish unaided. Timothy and Phillip This story is about Phillip's blind fight for survival all alone when he is faced with Timothy's death.

Characters

The characters develop very well through this novel. We are given an good insight into Phillip's background by the way he behaves and feels towards a Negro. Phillip is quite spoilt at home and he cannot fend for himself. This changes though when he becomes friends with Timothy, who is both physically and mentally

stronger than him. Timothy shows him how survive and not to panic when they are in trouble, but to think everything out clearly and try to resolve the problem.

Mood

The mood in this story is one of fear for Phillip but maybe hope for Timothy. When Phillip realises that their chances of being rescued are slim he becomes afraid and anxious of being left on the cay forever. Timothy is old and he knows it. His life is coming to an end and he fears that he will leave Phillip on the island by himself and that he will not be able to cope.

Personal response

This novel shows that black people are friendly and considerate and not dirty and abuseful as Phillip's mother sees them. It also displays the fare and hardship in the times of the Second World War.

Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and I thought that the plot was very good. Just one afterthought though, and that is that I wished it was longer.

The language in the book is fairly straight forward and so is the story so I would only recommend it for a 12-13 age group. Though nearly anyone older than that could enjoy it as a short story.

Overall I would give this novel7 out of 10.

