



After Hannibal

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The workings of history and the ambiguities of justice have been fruitful themes for author Barry Unsworth. In *AFTER HANNIBAL*, the characters' relationships with Italian history imply that all human endeavors are useless, "the same destiny await[s] all human habitations." In the legal practice of the oracular lawyer Signor Mancini, the novel's pivotal character whom most of the other characters consult, even the law offers no real justice. However, to extract that bleak message from the fates of these characters, most of them victims of their own flaws—truculence, passivity, greed—seems unnecessarily pessimistic.

Part of the problem lies in the large number of characters who inhabit this little world. With a dozen major characters, the novel scarcely provides space for the drawing to be deep. As a result, the reader never feels an intimate understanding of the characters' motives. A related problem is that some of the characters are presented with broad satire while others are drawn seriously. The reader must move from comic descriptions of one household's sexual antics directly to the serious treatment of world history. These mixed modes add to the novel's thematic foginess.

AFTER HANNIBAL demonstrates Unsworth's passion for history as well as his love for the landscapes of Italy, and its plot cleverly interrelates the fates of the diverse people who live along one small access road. Nevertheless, its mixed modes and its lack of thematic clarity make it less artistically successful than Unsworth's previous novels *SACRED HUNGER* (1992) or *MORALITY PLAY* (1995).

Sources for Further Study

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