Accordion Crimes Essay, Research Paper

Accordion Crimes is a difficult book to place in a single time period because the story takes place over about 100 years, originating in a small Sicilian village, but the main setting and focus is the United States.

The various settings introduced in the book influenced the characters in various ways, but one instance of influence was great enough to cause his death. The accordion maker was literally ruled over by his setting. The setting around him was one of oppression that worked against him because he was Sicilian. “? The accordion maker saw the approaching men with searing clarity, the loose thread on a coat, mud-spattered trouser legs, a logging chain in a big hand, the red shine of the engorged faces, a man with one blue eye and one yellow eye. Even then he hoped to be saved. He was innocent!

Pinse held his revolver loosely in his hand, had lost his staff in the rush up the stairs, so crowded it had been, looked at the Sicilians knotted in the corner, their wicked eyes glittering, some of them pleading and praying – the cowards! He thought of the rat king, fired. Others fired.

A barrage of bullets and shot of every caliber and weight tore the Sicilians. The accordion maker reared twice and fell back.” A character that has a great deal of intrigue is the accordion maker. The most interesting fact of this character is that he has no name, only an occupation. This is symbolic of all the millions of faceless immigrants that came to America in search of their dreams, but very few found them waiting, much less at all. “…He had his theory, his idea of the fine instrument; with the proof of this one, he planned to make his fortune in La Merica.” The accordion maker himself was a large man, but more sensitive that most like him. He despised working through problems and simply let his wife handle them when she could. Once in La Merica, the accordion maker had to deal with squalid living conditions, but when one man wanted an accordion like the one he had made for himself, the accordion maker readily agreed. Despite that squalid living conditions, the accordion maker still had high hopes, “… He was fortunate to have the room – many slept in the streets and docks and every morning lifeless forms were carried away, throats slit and pockets turned inside out, even young children. All around him were men who had to piss in their nettles.” The accordion maker is a sort of introduction to the rest of the characters in the story in that they all live lower-middle to lower class lifestyles, with barely any income, and one finds that there is no epiphany or catharsis for the character, sometimes simply because you have the feeling he is ignorant of the truth, other times he dies before any resolution can be reached. One must remember that Accordion Crimes is a group of short stories that are bound together by an old accordion, with no character overlapping into two stories.

The plot of Accordion Crimes is a difficult one to describe as it is rather a collection of short stories and there is only one thing constant in every story, which is the accordion. Therefore, I have decided to write not of the overlying story, but of the journey of the accordion.

The story begins with a Sicilian accordion maker and his dream of making a fortune in La Merica. All he had is a green, two-row button accordion and some money. He takes his son, Silvano, with him so that there might be enough money for them to eat decently. The accordion maker ends up in the worst of conditions along with having his pockets as good as empty, almost makes some money by selling an accordion, but is killed with 10 other innocent Italians by a lynch mob, and the accordion is stolen by a black dockworker who goes down the Mississippi and sells the accordion to a Mr. Smith who owns a lumber shop in North Dakota for some food money. The accordion is bought from the now late Mr. Smith by Hans Beutle, who, along with Ludwig Messermacher and William Loats, founded the town of Prank with their farms. Soon after, their children began to grow up and some married and some changed their names because of the difficulty of having a foreign name. The town prospered and Beutle took his money and bought a better accordion and gave the old two-row to Messermacher, but not before half of their families died of infinite causes ranging from mysterious diseases to rape to insanity to catching parachuting Japanese bombs to having goat glands transplanted so as to increase libido at around age 60 (Hans Beutle?s fate). Messermacher puts the accordion in the bottom of a trunk and moves to Coma, Texas to grow cotton after losing everything in the stock market crash. Soon, the accordion makes its way to a barber shop window where it is bought by a young Mexican boy named Abelardo who goes on to have four children, three of which learn to play the accordion, while the fourth died at war. The daughter, Felida, ran away from home at 17 and became one of the best folk accordionists ever. Chris loved to play the accordion but was killed in a courtroom by a furious father-in-law after being arrested for dope smuggling. Years preceding his death, Abelardo hid 12 thousand dollars inside the accordion. Abelardo died of a spider bite that made him delirious and he played like a madman on the accordion for the last 20 seconds of his life. Baby came to own the green accordion, but left it on the floor of a cab and couldn?t remember anything about the cab. The accordion was found by a man named Charles Gagnon who was abandoned during his childhood and grew up in an orphanage. After some time in the service, he returned to his hometown of Random. Not finding anything of his parents he meets an old friend from the orphanage, Wilf. He eventually gets a house and makes a three man band with Wilf and his wife, Emma, whom Charles secretly lusts after. One day, Charles mysteriously looses all use of his legs a couple months after Wilf died in a horrendous truck accident. At a wedding that Emma gets Charles to go to, he meets Delphine, who takes him to a statue of St. Jude in the middle of nowhere that supposedly has healing powers. Almost immediately, Charles is returned the use of his legs, and after careful consideration, kills himself, and his accordion is sold to a place called The Little Boy Blue Pawnshop to pay for the gravemarker with his name and lifespan that is destroyed in a plane crash 10 years later. The accordion is then bought by Ivar Gasmann who collects antiques and has a little store in a town called Old Glory where he puts it for sale. Dick Cude buys the accordion for the daughter of Conrad Gasmann, Ivar?s brother. The daughter?s name is Vela and had the unfortunate accident of having her arms severed just below the elbow by a flying piece of sheet metal, and after she comes home, finds solace in Lawrence Welk for a while. After receiving the Accordion and the hundred or so tapes that Dick had, she is mortified and hates them all, and so they are thrown away, accordion and all. The accordion is rescued from the dump truck by the drivers, who end up pitching it out the window anyway, and the accordion is then found by some kids who pull out one of the thousand dollar bills, are tricked into thinking it is a one dollar bill by the old lady at the soda/gas stand, and buy a few sodas with it.

The Accordion Crimes was a fantastic book and I enjoyed reading it immensely because of the detail and amount of pictorial usage used all throughout the novel. Although there were only words in the book, at some points it was almost as if I was looking through a small mirror to the world in which all these things took place. I was also thoroughly impressed at the style Proulx uses in describing the disasters that befall the characters, as if they aren?t important. There were times that I had to double check a page to see if a certain character actually did die, which brings us to where I believed the book was lacking. I sometimes had the feeling that everything had been said and done, but the truth of the action was still in the obscured mind of the author, and I could not comprehend what was going on. I must admit though, that this in its entirety did actually add to the novel as the whole entire story wasn?t told by the author. A good deal of it is written by the reader. Another criticization of the book would easily be about the gloom of the entire thing. “Many stories about immigrants in the 20th century tend to be uplifting, but not Proulx?s. If one may criticize Accordion Crimes ever so milidly, it is only for its relentless existential bleakness.” Theme was an element that the book seemed to lack as a whole, unless you consider possibly that the accordion represents how we have no control over our lives, but how other people react to us decides our path.