



The Darling

By Russell Banks
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Introduction

The Darling is Hannah Musgrave's story, told emotionally and convincingly years later by Hannah herself. A political radical and member of the Weather Underground, Hannah has fled America to West Africa, where she and her Liberian husband become friends and colleagues of Charles Taylor, the notorious warlord and now ex-president of Liberia. When Taylor leaves for the United States in an effort to escape embezzlement charges, he's immediately placed in prison. Hannah's encounter with Taylor in American ultimately triggers a series of events whose momentum catches Hannah's family in its grips and forces her to make a heartrending choice.

Set in Liberia and the United States from 1975 through 1991, *The Darling* is a political/historical thriller -- reminiscent of Graham Greene and Joseph Conrad -- that explodes the genre, raising serious philosophical questions about terrorism, political violence, and the clash of races and cultures.

Questions for Discussion

- Over the course of *The Darling*, we see the narrator in various guises: as Hannah Musgrave, Dawn Carrington, and Mrs. Woodrow Sundiata; as daughter, lover, wife, mother; as political radical; international fugitive, and rural farmer. How does each of these roles contribute to your understanding of Hannah? How would you describe her true character?
- "When you have kept as many secrets as I have for as long as I have, you end up keeping them from yourself as well." Why has Hannah felt obliged to keep so many secrets? What aspects of her past does Hannah continue to conceal in her first-person narration of *The Darling*? Were there any experiences that you were surprised she chose to reveal?
- Who are Hannah's "dreamers," and how do her memories of them draw her back to Liberia? When she says that they are "central to my story," what does she mean? Describe some of her dreamers in detail: what are some of their human qualities, and how do these resonate for Hannah?
- How do Hannah's political beliefs take her to Liberia? How would you characterize Hannah's affiliation with Zachary Procter and the Weather Underground? Does her involvement in this organization radicalize her, or does it serve another purpose altogether in her political and intellectual development?
- Describe Hannah's relationship with her parents. What aspects of her upbringing seem to have influenced her to ability for emotional connection? What role does her father's pediatric expertise play in Hannah's personal happiness?
- Who is Woodrow Sundiata, and how would you describe his initial interest in Hannah? Why does Hannah agree to marry Woodrow? To what extent does the marriage between Woodrow and Hannah seem grounded in love?
- How does the political situation in Liberia change during Hannah's years there? What kinds of protections does her status as an American citizen offer Hannah during the tumultuous rule of President Tolbert and Samuel Doe? What explains Hannah's conflicted feelings about being the wife of a governmental official?
- Describe Charles Taylor and his connection to Woodrow Sundiata. Given her own criminal status as a fugitive, why does Hannah decide to aid and abet in Taylor's escape from an American prison? How does this decision come to haunt her?
- Many of the events in *The Darling* are grounded in the actual history of twentieth-century Liberia. How do Hannah's experiences as an American in Liberia speak to the complex and often confounding nature of colonialism and American foreign policy?
- "In the new history of America, mine was merely the story of an American darling, and had been from the beginning." How is Hannah's story that of an 'American darling'? What does her first-hand account of her experiences in Liberia enable us to understand about her and about the world at large?

About the Author

Russell Banks, one of America's most prestigious fiction writers, is president of the International Parliament of Writers and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His work has been translated into 20 languages and has received numerous international prizes and awards. He lives in upstate New York and is currently the New York State author.