

Ken Follett

From: John Evans
Sent: 26 February 2001 17:20
To: Ken Follett
Subject: Dirty Half-dozen

I've now read JACKDAWS twice. It bowls along fine, with good pacing and already a finished feel to it. Yet I found myself thinking Ho-hum here and there, and I wondered why. Perhaps it's because :

- 1) The new elements you introduce (eg homosexuality, smarty-pants interrogation methods) are pretty much window-dressing for a story we've already heard.
- 2) There may be a bit too much incident on the long and winding road that leads to the climax -- which was then, I felt, sketchily handled, and rather confusing.
- 3) The story is often implausible or logically flawed, which you get away with by means of cracking pace and having characters be witless, but you can do too much of that.
- 4) The main characters are uninteresting.

Apart from telling a different story, there's not much you can do about (1), (except, possibly, make the window-dressing convincing, which it isn't always).

You might consider streamlining the peripeteia (2). The Chatelle-Chartres-Paris scenes, I thought, were poor (the smell of fresh bread and the evening at the Ritz border on the impossible).

The main logical flaws (3) centre on Mlle Lemas and the safe house. Again and again, major, responsible characters on the Allied side ignore obvious danger signs and go blithely ahead. I think you have to give them convincing and imperative reasons for doing so. Maybe Dieter has to be a bit cleverer about how he uses Mlle Lemas and Stéphanie so as to cover up his tracks. Dieter also needs to learn how to get from Paris to Reims in a powerful car in less than eighteen hours, never mind the punctures, dust, and flies.

Here's what I think about the characters (4) :

Flick

- you obviously need to work out and tell her backstory properly.
- not once is she credible as an intellectual, a lover of French culture, etc. Her marriage is particularly hairy. ~~Her~~ husband, a small-town canoodler and poker addict with a cleaning-lady auntie, was apparently a Sorbonne philosophy lecturer in a former existence...
- something (I think) to avoid with female characters in groups is having them getting ratty with each other etc. For some reason best known to the male chauvinist gods, when men fall out, the tension rises; if women do, it seems petty. (I'm wondering if this happens when the writer's a woman, but I can't think of an example -- possibly because men write action/adventure stories). Flick spends most of her time being a bad group leader, getting cross with her naughty girls and vainly trying to assert her authority, instead of focussing on how to avoid problems and danger for these inexperienced recruits.

Dieter

- the big thing about him is his clever interrogation methods. These give you nice scenes, but I suggest you tighten them up to make them more credible. Even if Mlle Lemas is an old maid who likes her food, she's a brave and not totally stupid woman. In her shoes (brown and black), I'd thank the German bastard politely for his tray of food, and decline to eat. If I were Michel, would I copy out a chapter from Madame Bovary, or would I judge that it could only be something the Germans want to use against me or another Resistance member, and refuse?
- like all espionage villains, he'd be better if he thought more rigorously (and less flashily). Again, it should, I think, appear necessary to him to build a firewall round the safe house, so the enemy has no reason to suspect he's busted it.

Paul

- with Flick and Dieter in better focus, he should do. Why Flick falls for him is not very clear. But then, why did she fall for Michel?

You asked me about the factual background. I've noted things on the MS which I'll return to you. Here are some more general points :

Occupied France

You rightly say, here and there, that life was tough and food scarce, but, in detailed incident, you assume creature comforts that were missing. Germany bled France dry. Wheat and rye harvests went mostly to the Reich; French bakers had to make do with second-choice mixtures of bad flour and bran. Ordinary folk couldn't get crusty "French" bread, or croissants, or good pastry, just a rationed amount of what they called "black bread" (pain noir). Potatoes became a luxury -- people ate swedes and Jerusalem artichokes, and dreamed of spuds. Wine was rationed, large amounts being requisitioned to be distilled for fuel. Champagne was for the Germans or the black market, if you had the money and the contacts. Coffee and pastis were ersatz. There were power cuts, mostly morning and afternoon, and coal and wood (in town) were scarce -- so little heating or running hot water.

North-eastern France: Many people went south in 1940 and only returned at the end of the war. As you rightly point out, young men were rare, being either PoWs, in Germany under the forced labour scheme, or having gone to the Maquis to avoid that. Reims and its area must have been rather empty -- old folk, women, not so many children, not enough people to do the work.

The Resistance

Neither OSS, nor MI6, nor SOE, ran the French Resistance (though SOE had a few circuits created by their operatives). At this stage in the war, the Resistance was unified, from Communists through anarchists, socialists, conservatives, even through to some right-wing nationalists, into the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), of which the c-in-c was General Koenig, appointed by De Gaulle. Allied intelligence mostly ignored Free French intelligence, who also had their undercover agents, liaison officers, couriers. The French "resistants" considered they had given their allegiance to De Gaulle, and didn't take orders from Allied agents. However, they happily worked with them insofar as a trusting relationship had been built up during the war, and insofar as the Allied agents held the key to money, arms, logistics, etc. You show this when Flick is near Chartres, but elsewhere you give the impression the natural leaders were the Allied agents.

And that the French were incapable... Brave, like foolhardy children, but thoughtless and disorganized. (Like Michel, leader of a major circuit, who is colossally brain-dead from one end of the story to the other.) Needless to say, this is not historically factual.

Requests!

There are a few things I'd like to ask you. The first concerns the convoy train. I put some notes into the MS about this, but I've since had further thoughts. This may sound prudish (though I'm not, I'll happily write scatology), but I don't think we can really depict the suffering of those people on their way to hell -- not unless we're ready to address the profound questions that are raised. In your story, Sergeant Baecker is Grand Guignol, bloody but farcical. A convoy of deportees going east in 1944 is deadly serious. Might Dieter not find some other way of getting what he wants from Michel?

The other requests concern names. You've obviously forgotten, but Dieter is the name of the German in my story. I'd like to keep it.

The other is the egregiously-named Gilberte. If you won't change her name for Proust's sake, perhaps you'll do it for Gigi, aka... Gilberte. How about Ginette?

Sorry to hear your news. It must be difficult, having children divorce, but three couples at once... Between this and the political scene, it must have been quite a rough year.

Anyway, best wishes for the coming elections!
(And, of course, best wishes tout court!)

John