

Foreword

This novel, the publishers said, is a forgotten classic; it is important and will interest you.

I picked it up with little enthusiasm. An unpromising, tatty old hardback with rough-cut pages; a writer I'd never heard of; the author's gist and purport unknown to me. I'd already put it off for several weeks until, as it happened, I had a week by the North Sea and plenty of sunshine to read in. So I opened it. . . without much expectation of enjoyment.

By page one I was gripped. In fact, I suspect it may have been by paragraph one.

A corpse – and of a child at that. A murderer – and one who insists on being charged. Mystery, intrigue and plot: there is nothing I love more, especially for a summer's read on a lazy afternoon in the garden, to the sound of waves whispering below. And, unlike those books which occasionally start well but then bog you down in a mire of worthiness before you're half way through, the pace of the story gathered momentum the further in I travelled. Until eventually I found myself cowering under the hero's own Damoclean dilemma: he must either lose the principle he was fighting for, or his life.

My requirements as a reader are simple. I must want to turn the next page. I did. This tale had it all: romance, and of the peculiarly mid-twentieth century intellectual flavour which is so understated and winsome. Overseas adventure, with an anthropological twist to give academic interest. And a court case full of tension and suspense – as the argument, and Templemore's fate, swung first this way, then that.

I must also like the characters. And I did this, too. As Douglas Templemore developed from the rather naive and diffident writer to the principled campaigner prepared to throw away his life for a cause; as he reported his failures to the woman he loved with a ruthless honesty which rather enhanced his

integrity than otherwise; as he fought on to the bitter end, he engaged and persuaded us, and won stature with his courage.

So it was certainly a romping good read.

But this book is far more than just a pleasant afternoon whiled away on holiday. The central issue is what it means to be human. And as the thesis unfurled, I found it disingenuously complex. "This is going to be easy," I thought glibly as I tucked in. "A human being is instantly recognisable. . ." But how?

Vercors was the pen name of the French writer and illustrator Jean Bruller (1902-1991), which he chose because of the significance of the place Vercors to the French Resistance in which he fought.

And it is not hard to see why, writing in 1952, he would consider the nature of humanity to be of such concern. The worst atrocities committed by Man on Man are usually only made possible because we have convinced ourselves that someone of a different skin colour, or a different social class, or even a different gender or age, is not really fully human in the way that we ourselves are. How else could such a civilised and cultured country have committed such dreadful deeds on such a scale? Those involved persuaded themselves that non-Aryans were sub-human, that's how.

This issue is just as pertinent today. What is the human status of the foetus? Or of the ten day old embryo? Or the baby at the point of birth who has some deformity or defect? Are such creatures fully human as we are? Or are they lesser, dependent on us to grant them rights and their special identity as a member of our species? And if so, when do they change, and how, and to what, and is the transformation instant or gradual?

And what about the body of a loved one trapped in a permanent coma?

The philosophical answer, perhaps, is that there is no answer. That the decision is harder than we had thought. That a precise definition of Humankind will never be possible.

But there is, nevertheless, a very definite moral answer in Vercors' narrative. There is no doubt in the reader's mind as the story unfolds, that whatever the intellectual uncertainty may be about those whose humanity is ambiguous, the villains of the tale are those who exploit any loophole in the rights of others in order to serve their own ends. . . while the hero is the one who, unsure himself, nevertheless is prepared to relinquish profit, convenience, liberty, even life itself, to give others the benefit of the doubt.

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