

Seeking the Inaccessible in Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*

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Abstract

The American novelist Robert Stone died this January, and a sense of what made him great is captured in a eulogy, not to Stone but to American idealism, delivered in his 1977 novel *A Flag for Sunrise* by a world-weary anthropologist. Invited to lecture in Central America, Frank Holliwell gets drunk and sardonically soapboxes to his outraged audience: "I have the honor to bring you hope, ladies and gentlemen and esteemed colleagues. Here I speak particularly to the enemies of my country and their representatives present tonight. Underneath it all, our secret culture, the non-exportable one, is dying. It's going sour and we're going to die of it. We'll die of it quietly around our hearths while our children laugh at us. So, no more Mickey Mouse, *amigos*."

Both harrowing and hilarious, the scene also reveals, with its talk of "secret culture," the unifying thread of this densely woven political novel set in the fictional nation of Tecan. As this presentation will show, *A Flag for Sunrise* abounds with secrets, illusions and undercurrents. There are the CIA spooks covertly supporting Tecan's right-wing dictatorship; the subversive Catholic mission they persuade Holliwell to investigate; the offshore reef where Holliwell dives too deep and encounters an evil both elemental and unnamed. This last is significant, for in spite of the political incisiveness that made the novel a finalist for all three of America's major literary awards, its vision transcends politics. From the mission's heterodox Father on down, the book is suffused with the Gnostic doctrine that reality is an intoxicating illusion and truth is both secret and remote. It is this sense of concealment that makes *A Flag for Sunrise* the finest exploration of Stone's abiding theme: the problem of the inaccessibility of God.

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