

## The Charm of Sidney Sheldon's Novels as Seen through *Master of the Game*

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### I. Introduction

Before turning to fiction, Sidney Sheldon wrote more than thirty motion picture screenplays, eight Broadway plays, and 250 television scripts. Sheldon was also a recipient of an Academy Award for the screenplay *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* (1947), a Tony Award for *Redhead* (1959), and Screen Awards for *Easter Parade* (1948), and *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950). He is a prolific television writer, creating such well-known series as "The Patty Duke Show," which was also popular in Japan, and "I Dream of Jeannie."

His first novel, *The Naked Face* (1970), was nominated for an "Edgar" by the Mystery Writers of America and acclaimed by *The New York Times* as the "best first mystery novel of the year." Since then, Sidney Sheldon continues to write such "blockbusters" as *The Other Side of Midnight* (1973), *A Stranger in the Mirror* (1976), *Bloodline* (1977), *Rage of Angels* (1980) which was a Main Selection of the Literary Guild, *Master of the Game* (1982) which topped U.S. paperback sales in 1983 and was a dual Main Selection of the Literary Guild, *If Tomorrow Comes* (1985), *Windmills of the Gods* (1987) which was another dual Main Selection of Literary Guild, *The Sands of Time* (1988) again a dual Main Selection, *Memories of Midnight* (1990) which was a serial based on *The Other Side of Midnight*, and his latest novel, *The Doomsday Conspiracy* (1991). He has written eleven novels in twenty years and every one has been on *The New York Times* best-seller list. He continues to break records and enjoys an established reputation as a "blockbuster" novelist. His novels are published in 36 countries and over

150,000,000 of his books have been sold worldwide. (He has even written half a dozen stories for young Japanese people learning English. These are published along with cassettes and compact discs with such narrators as Orson Welles, Jerry Lewis, Phoebe Cates, and Helen Hayes.)

Why have Sheldon's books been so popular worldwide? What catches the hearts of a large and diverse number of people---“truck drivers, college professors, nurses, hookers, scientists and housewives?”<sup>1</sup> He is a storyteller and he takes pride in being a storyteller. He credits the influence of “some of the world's greatest storytellers: Somerset Maugham, Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, etc.”<sup>2</sup> as he grew up reading their works. His books are, without question, utterly interesting. It is often said that once the reader picks up his book, then he/she cannot put it down.<sup>3</sup>

Yet his books are different from each other. There are cliff-hangers, there is a mystery, a success story of a TV stand-up comedian, and there is a “fast-paced thriller.” There are stories of family dynasties or family sagas, and there is a story of international intrigue and its collapse. There are stories full of tricks and counter-tricks, and there is a story of a Basque terrorist and a story of romantic adventure.

In spite of their different story lines, Sheldon's novels have some common characteristics. The rest of this paper will look at those characteristics, explore them in the novel *Master of the Game*, and offer some conclusions as to why his novels are so popular worldwide.

## II. Characteristics of his novels

### 1. Strong female characters

#### a. Women are important to the story.

Protagonists are overwhelmingly women; seven out of eleven novels have women protagonists. Even when a woman does not play a main

role, she still plays an important part.

- b. These women are beautiful, intelligent, and gutsy.

The women protagonists Sheldon creates are all beautiful, very bright, and full of guts. Sheldon doesn't describe women who are "housewifely" or "passive" or "pretty." Women in his books effectively put their plans into practice and they outwit their antagonists when necessary. They maneuver the men. Answering the questions regarding whether he prefers writing about men or women, Sheldon said, "Women, and I like them to be beautiful. Why should they be ugly? There's a cliché that if you're beautiful, you're dumb. I hate that. My women are all achievers. They are not sitting home having babies and cleaning the stove."<sup>4</sup>

- c. These women are dimensional. They have feelings and depth.

The women are believable characters with real feelings and emotions. Sheldon deals with the psychology of a woman's craving for love, feelings of jealousy and vengeance, etc. and, as a result, the reader can't help "identifying with his characters"<sup>5</sup> and becoming emotionally involved in the stories.

## 2. Attention to detail

- a. The general background (time and place) is discussed in detail.

The backgrounds in his novels expand to cover a wide range of areas in the world and extend over a long period of time. He researches both the areas and the time periods.

- b. The specific settings are carefully detailed.

The details of the business world (*A Stranger in the Mirror*), the pharmaceutical business (*Bloodline*), the breathtaking courtroom scenes (*Rage of Angels*), and the diamond world (*Master of the Game*) are so authentically depicted that the reader can feel as if

he/she were actually there. Sheldon goes around the world to research his novels. He writes about places from first-hand information. He only writes about places he has been in. He does this to the point of not writing about a certain meal in a certain restaurant if he had not eaten a meal in such a restaurant.

c. Sex.

The steamy lives of Sheldon's characters are always graphically described.

3. Theme of conflict between good and evil

a. There are lots of little conflicts within the stories.

The novels are full of conflicts which produce tension and suspense and keep the reader's attention to the end. These conflicts can be between people and/or events.

b. The main conflict is between good and evil.

There is always a villain. But Sheldon's villains are human and they are not completely bad from head to foot. The reader can identify with them to a certain point.

c. Justice is always served.

Evil is destroyed and justice is served at the end. So, although the reader sympathizes with the villain to some degree, the villain does not ultimately win. For if evil were to triumph, the reader wouldn't like his books so much.

4. His books are easy to read.

Through the characterization and the attention to detail as well as his easy writing style, his plots are easy to follow and the dialogs are easy to understand.

### III. *Master of the Game*

#### 1. The Women in *Master of the Game*

*Master of the Game* is a family saga that begins and ends with the scene of Kate Blackwell's ninetieth birthday at Cedar Hill House in Dark Harbor, Maine in 1982. The story covers 100 years, beginning before Kate's birth and ending at the party. Kate Blackwell is the central protagonist in the story. The story revolves around her family history and her attempts to manipulate that history. Kate is beautiful, intelligent, and determined. She was a tycoon of a now worldwide conglomerate which was founded on a much smaller scale by her father, Jamie McGregor. "She was a slim, petite woman, with a regal bearing that made her appear taller than she was. She had a face that one remembered."<sup>7</sup> This beautiful Kate Blackwell who "following her father's footsteps, attains her goals in business and private life through shrewd maneuvering"<sup>8</sup> is also a woman of depth and feelings.

Kate is not the only woman important to the story. Kate's mother, Margaret, and Kate's twin granddaughters, Eve and Alexandra, are also key characters. They are all beautiful. They are all strong, although that strength is seen in different ways and in different areas. They each have distinct personalities, yet influences of one generation to the other can also be seen. Kate and Eve are similar in their drives for power. Margaret and Alexandra are similar in having strengths that are more focused on people. They can think and care about others while Kate and Eve think and care primarily in regard to themselves.

We can see the cycle of the generations as well as the centrality and strength of the women in *Master of the Game* in the following summary of the story.

Margaret is the only daughter of an unscrupulous man named Van der Merwe who cheated Jamie McGregor, an 18 year old Scot prospector in South Africa, out of his lucky diamond strike. After cheating Jamie, Van der Merwe tried to kill him. After narrowly escaping death, Jamie stole the diamonds back from Van der Merwe and founded his business dynasty. Jamie then took vengeance on Van der Merwe by getting Margaret pregnant, discarding her, and foreclosing on the distraught Van der Merwe. This eventually caused Van der Merwe to commit suicide.

Margaret, however, was not defeated by her fate. She gave birth to a boy and when she realized Jamie had no intention of coming to see his son, she decided that his son would go to see Jamie instead. So, she left her baby at his father's house while he was out and she went on a week long trip. She thought her scheme worked. However, Jamie proposed to adopt his son and let Margaret be his son's governess. This filled her with outrage and she made preparations to leave with her son and go to America. She would not compromise. She insisted that she be Jamie's wife and that if Jamie wouldn't accept both of them, then there would be no way for them but leave South Africa for a new life. The only way he could prevent them from going was to offer his hand. And so Margaret won. "He was a man who had grown used to controlling and manipulating others, and this time it was he who had been manipulated." Margaret won but her life did not become easy. Jamie paid no attention to her. Even so, Margaret did not give up but turned her energies toward helping the town. She was even able to persuade Jamie to use his company's train to help prospectors who were out of hope and money. Jamie came to be proud of her in a way but his attitude toward her never changed.

Jamie's life was changed when his son was murdered. He had a

severe stroke from the shock and became a vegetable. Margaret took care of him by herself, turning down the doctor's advice to put him into a sanitarium. This disastrous happening gave her a great peace of mind because Jamie, who she had loved deeply for so long, "finally, truly, belonged to her."<sup>10</sup> Jamie died one year later.

Kate was born the year before her father died as a result of Jamie's one-night whim. She was "hauntingly beautiful" but, unlike her mother, she "equated power with life."<sup>11</sup> This desire for power began during the Boer War (1899-1902). She was seven years old at this time and taken with her mother to one of the South African prison camps as a prisoner. Through that experience of helplessness, she came to realize that she must have power. If she had power she would never be that miserable again. When she was eighteen and in her last year of boarding school in England, her mother died. She returned to South Africa, enrolled in a business school and at the age of twenty inherited Kruger-Brent, Ltd., the business her father had founded.

Her life goal was to build Kruger-Brent "into the biggest, most powerful company in the world."<sup>12</sup> She planned to do this with David Blackwell who was an executive of the company and twenty-two years her senior. Since she was a small girl, she had planned to marry him and run the company with him. When she discovered his plans to marry the daughter of an American buyer, move to America, and begin a new business there, she quickly moved to squash those plans through deceit and artifice. She succeeded and they were married. She took "delight in the maneuvering and machinations of the game."<sup>13</sup>

World War I (1914-18) broke out and David didn't want to make money out of the war. Kate had no such feelings and while David was off fighting, she was involved in manufacturing arms and turning their

company into one of the fastest-growing conglomerates in the world. In 1923, Kate moved the headquarters from South Africa to New York because the business center of the world was New York. In the middle of the expansion of Kruger-Brent, David was killed in an explosion. The shock of this hastened the birth of Kate's son, Tony.

Kate planned for Tony to take over the company, but what he cared most about was painting. He was actually quite talented, but Kate was not content to let him live his own life. She destroyed his dream of being a painter by having a famous art critic publically criticize his works. Doing this to her son bothered her but not enough to make her let him run his own life.

"It is a pity. Your son has talent, Mrs. Blackwell. He could have become an important painter."...Kate sat at her desk, filled with a deep sadness. She loved her son so much. If he ever found out...She knew the risk she had taken. But she could not stand by and let Tony throw away his inheritance.<sup>14</sup>

Her manipulation of her son's life didn't stop there. When her son learned of her machinations, he shut himself off from everyone. Kate then found him a wife that would profit the company and bring him out of himself. The marriage turned out to be a success and Tony was happy. But the happiness didn't last long. Kate manipulated Tony's wife into having a child, in spite of the fact that Kate and Tony's wife both knew that childbirth would probably kill her. This fact was kept from Tony until his wife died in childbirth at which time Tony went crazy and shot Kate.

Kate still did not change. She agonized over that fact that her own son tried to kill her, yet even while in intensive care in the hospital, she

determined to continue in her own way.

*But I am not weak, Kate thought. I can face this. I can face anything. I'm going to live. I'll survive. The company will survive.*<sup>15</sup>

Her next plan was to have one of her grandchildren inherit Kruger-Brent. (Tony's wife gave birth to twins at her death. Kate destroyed Tony completely and had committed him to an asylum.) Kate named her grandchildren, Eve and Alexandra. They were identical twins who were "beautiful, bright, and responsive"<sup>16</sup> from the start. Although physically it was impossible to tell the twins apart, their personalities were quite different. Eve was like Kate and Alexandra was more like Tony. Naturally Kate favored Eve and planned to have Eve take over the company. Eve herself intended to be "Gran's heiress."<sup>17</sup> However, Eve was even more deceitful and cunning than her grandmother. She lied constantly and lived very promiscuously. Her misconduct was so great that Kate was forced to disinherit her. This was very hard on Kate as she was forced to change her plans.

After being disinherited, Eve determined to destroy her sister and become the only possible heir. She planned to have George Mellis, the good-looking but sadistic son of an important Greek family, marry Alexandra and then kill her in a make-believe accident. George agreed to be a part of this plan. George and Alexandra got married, but George, when he realized that he would not be able to get rid of Eve, tried to overpower her. Through this, Eve was badly disfigured. Her doctor recommended a top plastic surgeon, Keith Webster, who was able to restore her looks. Eve made the doctor promise not to tell the police or her grandmother, because she didn't want her grandmother to find out and worry. She still planned to have George kill her sister. About this

time, Kate found out about Eve's "accident" and that Eve cared about Kate and didn't want her to worry. So Kate re-inherited Eve. At this point, George became a hindrance to Eve. Eve wanted to change the plans but George wouldn't listen. George planned to go through with Alexandra's murder and while he was attempting to throw her off the yacht and into the sea, he was stabbed to death and dumped overboard. Right before he died, George realized that Eve had traded place with Alexandra and it was Eve who killed him.

This is the story of *Master of the Game*. What happens in the end of this Sidney Sheldon novel? Will Eve get away with her crime? Will she retain her inheritance? We will look at what happens to Eve in the section on the conflict of good and evil.

## 2. Attention to detail

*Master of the Game* covers a time span of 100 years and a wide range of areas. The story develops with a lot of conflicts and incidents centered around Kate as her history is traced from her father's generation to the generation of her great-grandchild (1883-1982). From the point of locales, this novel takes place in various parts of the world. Kate's father came from the Scottish Highland down to South Africa and founded his business dynasty there. Kate lived in South Africa and England and, in 1923, she moved their headquarters to New York. Krugar-Brent also had offices and factories all over the world and there were telephones and cables, so she could get in touch with those offices in minutes.

The description of locales in Jamie's period, as well as the living conditions and situations of prospectors for diamonds and those who made living on them in the village of Klipdrift near Cape Town, is vividly described to the extent that the reader even can smell them. It goes without saying that the reader easily visualize them. Sheldon says,

"I researched *Master of the Game* by going into the Kimberly Mine in South Africa and another diamond mine owned by DeBeers, by interviewing the DeBeers people and talking to diamond merchants."<sup>18</sup>

His books are never lacking in sex. They are quite detailed and leave little to the imagination. This may be another reason why the books are so well read. In *Master of the Game* this can especially be seen in Eve's life. She is quite promiscuous so there are many opportunities for these types of scenes. Also her physical relationship with the sadistic George is quite graphically described.

### 3. Conflict of good and evil.

Sheldon says, "the basis of any story is conflict. Without foils to pit against protagonists, there would be no story."<sup>19</sup> In *Master of the Game* there are four main pairs of protagonists-antagonists. These are not the only pairs of protagonists-antagonists (i.e. Kate vs. David Blackwell, Kate vs. Tony's wife, Eve vs. Keith Webster, etc.), but the following pairs are the overall focus of the story.

1. Salomon Van der Merwe versus Jamie McGregor.
2. Jamie McGregor versus Margaret Van der Merwe.
3. Kate Blackwell versus Tony Blackwell.
4. Eve Blackwell (and/versus George Mellis) versus Alexandra Blackwell.

Sheldon basically realizes that "in real life, no one is all good or all bad."<sup>20</sup> However, in his novels evil is eventually destroyed at the end and justice is served. Although evil is destroyed, good people are often victimized and some of them (i.e. Margaret, Tony, Tony's wife) are destroyed as well. So, evil is punished, but good is not always rewarded. We can see this by looking at each of the above main pairs and the results of each of these conflicts.

Salomon Van der Merwe versus Jamie McGregor. The relationship began as a partnership between a young prospector and the owner of a general store. When Jamie struck diamonds, it all should have been shared equally, but Van der Merwe cheated Jamie out of his half and tried to kill him. In this relationship Van der Merwe was the villain. As the villain he ended up losing his riches and was driven to suicide. Justice was served.

Jamie McGregor versus Margaret Van der Merwe. In this relationship, Jamie was the villain. He used and abused Margaret and he ended up a vegetable and then died. He paid for what he did and the child he never knew inherited his company.

Kate Blackwell versus Tony Blackwell. Mother versus son. It is true that as a mother Kate loved her son, but she was too confident in herself and judgment. She didn't notice that Tony was a very different person from her and she forced him into her choices for his life. Kate deprived Tony of his chance to be an important painter and, even worse than that, deprived him of his beloved wife, Marianne. Kate wanted an heir to carry on Kruger-Brent and although she cared for Marianne because Tony loved her, Kate cared for her company more. She used Marianne's love for Tony and manipulated her into having children at the expense of Marianne's life. Tony loved his mother and tried to live up to her expectations. When he realized that his mother was the one who destroyed his dream and his wife, he lost his mind. Kate was a villain to him. How was justice served? Kate lost her son. Everything she manipulated to get, she lost. Not only that, but she never changed. Even at the end of the story, when she was 90 years old, she still wanted to have her great grandson, Robert, who was only nine years old, take over the company. However, Robert's father was a man of sense who protected his son and let him live his own life. So, justice was served in

the sense that she never got what she ultimately wanted. Her power meant nothing at the end.

Eve versus Alexandra. Identical twin sisters. Both were beautiful, but Eve seemed to be all evil and wickedness while Alexandra was innocent and pure. They were opposite in character and purity. Eve wanted power. She wanted it all to herself. She never wanted to share with Alexandra, even from the beginning. In fact, she was only five years old the first time she tried to kill her sister. Eve worked by herself against her sister, but she also took an accomplice of George Mellis. However, at times they worked together against Alexandra and at times they worked against each other. George was an evil person as well. He tried to harm Eve and he tried to kill Alexandra. Justice was served against him when he was killed by Eve. How was justice served against Eve? It was not served legally. Legally she was not caught, but she was punished. Concerning Eve's evasion from legal punishment, Sheldon says, "...In *Master of the Game*, if the murderer (Eve) got away with murder, it is because in real life hundreds of people get away with murder. Justice does not always prevail. In the case of Eve, she received an ironic kind of justice."<sup>21</sup> What was this ironic justice? In Eve's case it was carried out by the plastic surgeon, Keith Webster. Because he knew her deception, he forced her to marry him. When her boyfriend mentioned the wrinkles around her eyes, she asked her husband to remove the wrinkles and make her more beautiful. During the operation, her husband purposely made her ugly. From then on she hid herself from society and, in effect, became a living corpse. Justice was served.

#### 4. Easy to read.

*Master of the Game* is quite easy to read. The book is "slickly" written and the dialogues are vivid. The reader gets caught up in the

characters and the plot.

#### IV. Conclusion

Sheldon says that he begins to write his book from a character, then that character produces other characters and these characters naturally spin the story.<sup>22</sup> His characters have strong personalities and they are believable. His characterizations are so real, the reader feels as if they were neighbors or people he/she knows. Sheldon also says that he loves his protagonists so deeply that when they get angry, he feels their anger and when they feel miserable, he feels miserable, too. He continues by saying that if the writer cannot believe his characters, how can he expect the reader to believe them?<sup>23</sup>

Sheldon is very detailed in his research for each of his books and the precision and scope of this research is always one of the reasons his stories are very convincing and the reader feels as if he/she was there in the book living along with the characters. Furthermore, he chooses beautiful and rare places as the background of his stories, so the reader will be able to enjoy those places through the books.

All of this makes Sheldon's novels very attractive to a large cross-section of readers. There is something in every novel to attract someone. This something may be the strong characters, the interesting and varied settings of the stories, the themes of conflict between good and evil, and /or the strong emotions and feelings that the stories and their characters evoke in the reader.

Besides above-mentioned characteristics Sheldon's books are very easy to read. This doesn't necessarily mean that his English is easy but that his stories are easy to visualize and the English is easy on the reader's lips. The dialogues are quite believable and the reader can imagine

himself/herself saying those things. The main reason for the easy readability is due to Sheldon's previous experience in writing for screen, stage, and television. He himself admits this as he "is used to thinking of visual images and spoken dialogue."<sup>24</sup> He also writes by dictating to his secretary so that he can hear the book as it is being written. This helps leave the reader not only satisfied at the end of the novel but also with the impression that the reader has not read a book, but seen a movie. This is the power of Sidney Sheldon's novels and the reason they are so popular worldwide.

#### NOTES

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3. This set phrase is often used in reviews of Sheldon's books.
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7. Sheldon, Sidney. *Master of the Game*. New York: Warner Books, 1982. p.14.
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