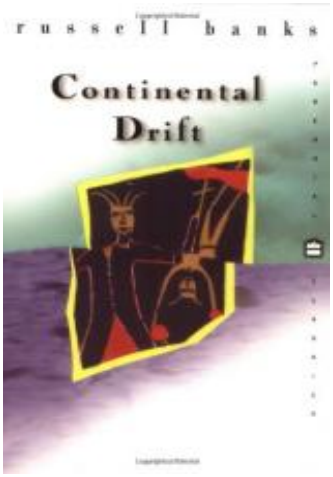
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Continental Drift

by Russell Banks



About the Book

Engrossing and visionary, comic and heartbreaking, Continental Drift tells the story of two people from different worlds moving slowly, yet inevitably toward each other as they search for a better life. It is set in the late seventies and early eighties, when America is plagued with recession, unemployment, and unprecedented crime. It is also the dawn of eighties' materialism---when it seems that the opportunity to make a quick buck is no longer the privilege of the rich alone. Workers, immigrants, even the urban poor begin to believe that wealth is within their grasp. Bob DuBois believes it too. Literally overnight he decides to leave his seemingly dead-end existence in New Hampshire and move his family to Florida, a place whose climate, population, and culture are at odds with the world Bob has known all his life.

For Haitian Vanise Dorsinvilles, Florida is also the land of opportunity. Like Bob, she realizes that there is nothing for her at home---and everything awaiting her at the end of her journey. With fewer possessions, and a far more perilous route, Vanise makes her desperate way north and east, enduring rape, forced labor, betrayal, near-drowning, and ultimately the loss of her child and her nephew.

In his portrait of contemporary America, Russell Banks focuses on two obscure lives driven by yearning, spiritual strength, and the hope for salvation. Caught up in the currents of their desire, Bob and Vanise drift helplessly from one predicament to another. Without money, neither feels capable of changing the course their lives have taken. Why can't these two people find a better life in Florida? They are both good, honest, and hardworking; that should be enough in the fabled land of opportunity. But as Banks shows us, other, stronger forces are at work. Racial prejudice, economic disparity, religious and social conventions, and most of all greed stand in the way of Bob's and Vanise's dreams. In the end, Bob dies in a back alley of Miami's "Little Haiti," and his wife and children return to New Hampshire destined for a life not much different from the one they tried to escape in the first place. Vanise, having lost what little she had, is now bereft of even her soul---she may as well be dead. Both lives, wasted, disappear from view, as the world and others move forward to take their place. It is up to us, Banks implies at the end of this devastating novel, not only to acknowledge the experiences of these characters, but to make sense of the seemingly inexorable drift of their lives and grieve their deaths.

Discussion Guide

1. What are your feelings about Bob Dubois and how did they change over the course of the novel? To what extent is Bob responsible for what happens to him and his family? To what extent is he a victim of circumstance and of those who take advantage of him? Do you consider Bob to be an "everyman"?

2. Banks compares the movement of refugees and other people escaping unbearable circumstance to the patterns of the earth's currents and geological shifts. How does this metaphor inform the novel? Is Banks saying that such human movement is inevitable and unavoidable? Are Bob's and Vanise's stories part of a larger, universal phenomenon?

3. What part does Vanise's religion, voodoo, play in her life and in the decisions she makes? How does her faith support her---and how does it betray her?

4. Even though he doesn't practice an organized religion, in what ways is Bob spiritual?

5. Given that Bob loves Elaine, what motivates him to cheat on her? What, if anything, does Marguerite offer Bob that Elaine can't provide? How is Marguerite's race a significant factor in Bob's relationship with her?

6. Family relationships and violence are common themes in Banks's work. What roles do they play in this novel?

7. In the chapter "Making a Killing," Bob meditates on the difference between hunters and fishermen, declaring himself to be the latter. Do you think this is true, based on Bob's actions and thoughts? What does this suggest about his potential for success?

8. Why do you think Bob decided to smuggle Haitian immigrants but not drugs? Is Bob any better than the smugglers with whom Vanise first traveled, who raped her and subjected her to such horrible conditions on board the boat?

9. Discuss Banks's narrative technique and the novel's structure. How do Bob's and Vanise's stories inform one another? When and how does Banks's narrator intrude, and when does the narrator speak from a distance? How do the italicized first and last sections frame the novel, and to what effect?

10. Why do you think Banks "killed off" Bob Dubois? Why couldn't he and Elaine have returned to New Hampshire? How does Bob's death---and its circumstances---support the novel's themes?

11. What makes **Continental Drift** a classic? Do you think it will still be considered an important book fifty years from now? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Russell Banks, twice a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, was one of America?s most prestigious fiction writers, a past 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 prizes and awards. On January 8, 2023, Banks passed away from cancer at the age of 82.

Critical Praise

" Russell Banks...explores the themes of good and evil, fate and freedom, success and failure, love and sex, and racism and poverty through alternating chapters focusing on dual protagonists: Bob Dubois, 30, who forsakes his deadend job as an oil burner repairman in New Hampshire to begin a new life in Florida, and Vanise Dorinsville, a young, illiterate Haitian mother who seeks refuge from poverty by fleeing to America...Original in conception, gripping in execution. "

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