

Philadelphia Inquirer Nov. 5, 1989

CHARLEY BLAND

Mary Lee Settle

Farrar-Straus-Giroux. 186 pp.

We know from the first pages of Mary Lee Settle's mournful novel that the love affair between its narrator and Charley Bland is doomed. The lovers are not star-crossed but enmeshed in an inviolable triangle where character lacks strength and compassion enough to permit love to survive.

"He won't marry you, you know, he never does," a woman calls out to the unnamed narrator. She'd known it from the start.

In 1944 the then 19-year-old narrator met an English airman in Florida. The next week they ran off and married. He crashed two months later. She kept her promise that if he died she would take his place and joined the WAAF. After the war she remained in Paris as an aspiring writer in "self-imposed exile" from a United States she thought "too fat, too healthy." When the novel opens in 1960, she has taken what she expects to be a temporary leave from the painter she lives but no longer sleeps with in a fifth-floor walk-up off the Rue Jacob.

She returns to visit her parents in her West Virginia home town. She will not leave again for the next seven years.

Waiting fatefully for the 35-year-old widow is the dissolute 45-year-old town ladies' man, Charley Bland. Two decades earlier, he had been the romanticized focus of her dreams. Back then it seemed "all the wild roads led to Charley Bland. . . . He made other people feel as if they were plodding. . . . He acted out our dreams of what we could hope to do when we grew up, if we only had the nerve." To her teenaged eyes, the ironically named Bland was so idealized that when he leapt into a pool "his dive was so clean there was only a parting, not a splash."

At 35, her eyes have matured. But they gaze longingly on a past she had thus far rejected. She had cut herself off from her roots and feels desperate to return to them. Her mother helps by asking Charley Bland to take this prodigal daughter to a country club dance. Having seen her own father as "a rake and a devil," she believes the rakish Charley will be lure enough to keep her daughter at home.

Charley whisks her from the dance, takes her to his brother's empty house and woos her with "Being with you is like being alone." Knowing that Bland "hated and used women," the narrator nevertheless remains with him all night, yielding both body and heart to what seem their parents' wishes as much as their own.

Except for Mrs. Bland, Charley's mother, the third corner of this most familiar of triangles. "It is," the narrator says, "the stuff of jokes, and comic strips, and suicides. It is the mother, and the son, and the woman, whether she is holy, whore, or wife."

Mrs. Bland enjoys the frequent visits of Charley's newest conquest. They relieve her daily boredom. She uses her "charm like a blunt instrument," knowing this woman too will pass and become another autographed photo in the Bland attic, leaving herself at almost 80 to hold her middle-aged son as securely as any mother with her toddler on a leash. His adulthood allows for some slackness--he may wander off and drink and indulge his petty male needs--but always he must return to the mother who trained him in charm rather than character, a cripple caring for a cripple until her death.

This, too, the narrator knows from the start. And knows until the end. She may wrongly attribute a line of Blake, but this widow is far from naive. She may accuse herself of being self-deluding, but she sees past, present and future without illusion.

Why, then, does she remain in this hopeless love affair? It is in answering this question so convincingly that *Charley Bland* rises out of the pulpy level a lesser writer could not have unearthed it from and achieves its artistic goal of showing human truth with glaring clarity.

She tells us, "It is when the ordinary becomes luminous that we are transformed." Both Charley and Mrs. Bland are, to her adult vision, ordinary. Even their triangle is ordinary, if heartbreaking. Yet, she allows both the love affair and its tragic course to attain the quixotic luminosity her girlhood eyes would have given them because she feels a desperate need for transformation.

"I am a Southerner," she says, "and there is bred in us, as carefully as if we were prize hounds, a sense of betrayal in leaving our roots." Charley Bland, the hero of her childhood, offers the hope of atonement. He "made the past shine; what he promised without saying a word was neither of our real lives but some mutual hope. The part of me I had not let live was no longer rejected." Faced with a doomed love affair, she is nevertheless in a position where she can scarcely lose. She either fulfills her past with Charley or she gets betrayed, one betrayal atoning for another, and can put her past at peace.

National Book Award-winning author Settle populates this West Virginia town with a vivid array of characters. They are frustrated, vulturous women and ineffectual men such as Charley's brother, Cubby: "He was, like many Southern men, saddled with a nickname left over from his childhood. I had always heard that it was because when he was a baby he used to lift his little arms to his mother and ask her to cuddle him. 'Cuddy,' he said, and he was still lifting his arms, still asking, still being half ignored."

Settle's tone ranges from elegiac when speaking of beaten romance to witty and charming in recalling childhood. But always it penetrates the nuances of Southern values with a candid sensibility reminiscent of Peter Taylor, and a prose as deadly accurate: "I saw Haley Potter's face, frozen with old resentment and the clinging snobbery that in our time replaced religion among the 'nice' people." Readers familiar with Settle's acclaimed *Beulah Quintet* will not be surprised at how gently but firmly this novel rips the mask of gentility off a culture trapped by rigidity, perniciousness and a tragic commitment to waste.

But *Charley Bland* is more than its graceful style and honest setting. At its core, it is a love story of an especially terrifying kind. The couple is not star-crossed because they are not Romeo and Juliet, not teenagers in the first blush of romance. They are lovers of middle age. Charley has had conquests, not love; lots of sparks, nothing that retains any glow. The narrator's hasty marriage ended long before, in death, so utterly forgettable an episode that shortly she could no longer recall the boy's face. She has left a painter she lived with passionlessly and chastely.

They devote seven years to a love that grows increasingly frustrating and hopeless, seven years of middle age tragically spent. If the love of youth feels passionate and fresh, the love of middle age feels portentous with meaning, a sense of destiny about what kind of lover we have been meant to be, how much romantic love will be ours in life. This may not be the last chance for the narrator and Charley, but they have, and destroy, this chance at a moment when time is frighteningly measurable.

In putting her past at peace, Mary Lee Settle's heroine pays dearly with her present and quite likely her future. That Settle walks so near the soapy territory of melodrama to bring us this story shows courage. That she achieves a powerfully artistic novel shows mastery