

# **Bats Fly at Dusk Short Guide**

## **Bats Fly at Dusk by Erle Stanley Gardner**

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# Characters

Bertha Cool is very much a part of the seamy world of *Bats Fly at Dusk*.

She is greedy and unintelligent. A mean 165 pounds (she once weighed 285), she has broad shoulders and a nasty enough temper to use her size to intimidate people. Blundering from one clue to the next, her interest is in gaining a share of any insurance payment to Josephine Dell or of an inheritance left by her recently deceased boss Harlow Milbers. Solving the mysteries of Milbers's death and of the shooting of the thoroughly slimy Jerry Bollman only interests Cool insofar as the solutions can help her make money.

Her partner Donald Lam has joined the Navy at the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States. The brains of the team, he helps Cool with telegrams from San Francisco, where he is based. It is he who arrives on leave in Los Angeles and solves the murder mysteries and reveals who is really who behind the characters' disguises. Without him, neither Cool nor the plodding police would have figured out the solutions to the novel's various crimes. He also manages to get Cool a cut of the insurance and inheritance money, making him a potent if distant actor in the plot.

The blind man, Rodney Kosling, and Josephine Dell are interesting figures in the novel's world of cruelty and deceit. Kosling is wealthy, not poor, and begs at a street corner simply for the sake of meeting people. He sets Bertha Cool on the trail of fraud and murder because he is genuinely concerned about the welfare of Dell, who has been kind to him. Dell likes him and is an honest character who wishes no one ill. Her simple good nature is in stark contrast to the personalities of the novel's other characters. Although Kosling is blind and Dell is recuperating from her injuries, they are spiritually whole people, in contrast to the spiritual cripples around them. Most of the other characters are miserly, selfish, greedy, and cruel.



## Social Concerns/Themes

*Bats Fly at Dusk* follows the events that evolve out of an unreported automobile accident in front of a blind beggar. The story involves frauds, snitches, and scoundrels, not the least of whom is the protagonist Bertha Cool, who like almost everyone else wants a cut of whatever money is generated as a result of the collision between an automobile and a secretary named Josephine Dell.

Hardly anyone is what he seems in this novel. The theme of disguise adds to the mystery of the novel and enhances the theme of people trying to be more than they are. As she tracks down leads, Cool discovers that most characters have secret lives, quite apart from their public ones. Loneliness and greed motivate most of those who live in a seamy Los Angeles. Greed seems to triumph over selflessness until the novel's climax.

## Techniques

Most of the novel's chapters are short, filled with action, and laden with clues for alert readers. Cool is an ironic figure who seldom recognizes what readers will spot. Her blundering is comic, as is her favorite phrase for frustration, "Fry me for an oyster!"

Humor mixed with mysterious events makes *Bats Fly at Dusk* pleasant as well as fast reading.



## Key Questions

The A. A. Fair novels about Cool and Lam are meant to be humorous excursions into a sleazy world of greed and deceit in which most detective-genre cliches are turned upside down. Discussion of *Bats Fly at Dusk* and the other novels would work best if group members have read several of the books in the Cool/Lam series; this is easy to do because the novels are quick, easy, and fun reading. A good focus for discussion would be the humor of the novels. Note how bizarre events are contrasted to Bertha Cool's single-minded devotion to acquiring money. She seems unaware of the weirdness in which she immerses herself, and much of the humor stems from irony — we readers certainly notice that Cool's world is outlandish and are amused by Cool's unawareness.

Lam is an interesting figure, and one who is hard to label. He is able to see the big picture, whereas Cool cannot, but he is so clever that mysteries could end prematurely once he sets to work on them. In *Bats Fly at Dusk*, Gardner solves this problem by having Lam serve in the navy, far away from the novel's principal events. Once he enters the story, he signals the end of the mystery. When discussing characters, one question to answer is whether Gardner made a mistake in creating Lam; does Lam spoil the fun of watching Cool blunder from one clue to the next? Is he, too, a humorous character?

Another fruitful avenue for discussion would be the portrait of Los Angeles presented in *Bats Fly at Dusk* and the other novels. Is it accurate? What does it emphasize? When reading the novel, does one get a feel for the underside of life in Los Angeles? Does Gardner show any special expertise in the way people live in Los Angeles?

1. Greed is a significant motivation in *Bats Fly at Dusk*, as in most of the A. A. Fair novels. In what forms does greed manifest itself? What appears to be Gardner's views on the effects of greed? How does greed affect the characters?
2. What disguises do characters use during the novel? Are any of the disguises used to good purpose? How much does Cool herself understand about the disguises as opposed to what we readers understand about them?
3. Note how some characters are physically incomplete and others are spiritually incomplete. What does Gardner do with symbolism? Does it advance the plot? Does it tell us some thing about the novel's themes?
4. Where is truth in *Bats Fly at Dusk*?  
How is it found? Who has it? Who finds it? How is it used?
5. The Cool/Lam novels tend to emphasize action and drama over the other characteristics of fiction, which makes them easy to dramatize. An enjoyable project could be the creating of a play based on *Bats Fly at Dusk* or one of the other novels.



6. Is it disappointing to discover the seemingly exotic events of the novel involve people with ordinary desires and ordinary minds? Is Kosling odd enough to satisfy your taste for the unusual?

7. In *Bats Fly at Dusk*, some characters are plainly nastier than others, yet the good ones have some bothersome secrets of their own. One of the most artfully made points of the novel is that no one is easily judged by his or her appearance. Even the best people have unpleasant secrets. What are the various secrets of the characters?

Which secrets are the worst? Which do harm?

8. It is almost inevitable that someone will want to compare the Cool/Lam novels to the Perry Mason novels.

They are significantly different kinds of books. In the Cool/Lam novels, the many injustices of life are born matter-of-factly by the characters, but in the Perry Mason novels injustice and justice are at war with each other, with Mason vigorously helping those who cannot help themselves. Even so, the discovery of similarities in theme or attitude between the two series of novels could prove enlightening, serving to indicate what Gardner's overall objectives were when he wrote.

## Literary Precedents

*Bats Fly at Dusk* is a variation on the hard-boiled detective tradition of American mystery writing. Sam Spade of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer of several novels, including *I, the Jury* (1947), are both examples of hard-boiled detectives. They are tough, know the seamy side of life, and enjoy the company of good-looking women. They also follow a code of ethics that while not strictly adhering to the letter of the law, means that they must pursue mysteries to the bitter end. Spade, for instance, turns a woman he cares for in to the police because a private eye is supposed to do something about the murder of his partner, no matter who gets hurt.

The Bertha Cool/Donald Lam novels have fun with the hard-boiled detective story. Cool is plainly unethical; her code on honor extends little further than her pocketbook, even though she admits some liking for Lam and Kosling. *Bats Fly at Dusk*, with its exotic title and a wealthy man's legacy, as well as its allusions to theories about the nature of war, turns out to be about some not-so-clever people with ordinary minds. The dark world of the novel really is seamy, without any underworld masterminds. Cool and the other characters lack the imagination to be exotic like Casper Gutman, the villain of *The Maltese Falcon*.





## Related Titles

The Cool/Lam novels began with *The Bigger They Come* (also published as *Lam to the Slaughter*) in 1939. In this novel, Donald Lam has yet to join Bertha Cool's detective agency. Small, frail, and irresistibly attractive for women, Lam is the opposite of the obese and menacing Cool. Between her heavy-handed investigation and his analysis of clues, they work their way through a series of funny and wellplotted mysteries, ending with *All Grass Isn't Green* in 1970. While not as popular as the Perry Mason novels, the Cool/Lam novels have a large and devoted following.

*Bats Fly at Dusk* is the seventh in a series of twenty-nine books about Bertha Cool and Donald Lam, all written under the pen name A. A. Fair.

Others in the series are *The Bigger They Come*, 1939 (also published as *Lam to the Slaughter*); *Turn on the Heat*, 1940; *Gold Comes in Bricks*, 1940; *Spill the Jackpot*, 1941; *Double or Quits*, 1941; *Owls Don't Blink*, 1942; *Bats Fly at Dusk*, 1942; *Cats Prowl at Night*, 1943; *Give 'Em the Ax*, 1944 (also published as *Axe to Grind*); *Crows Can't Count*, 1946; *Fools Die on Friday*, 1947; *Bedrooms Have Windows*, 1949; *Top of the Heap*, 1952; *Some Women Won't Wait*, 1953; *Beware the Curves*, 1956; *You Can Die Laughing*, 1957; *Some Slips Don't Show*, 1957; *The Count of Nine*, 1958; *Pass the Gravy*, 1959; *Kept Women Can't Quit*, 1960; *Bachelors Get Lonely*, 1961; *Shills Can't Cash Chips*, 1961 (also published as *Stop at the Red Light*); *Try Anything Once*, 1962; *Fish or Cut Bait*, 1963; *Up for Grabs*, 1964; *Cut Thin to Win*, 1965; *Widows Wear Weeds*, 1966; *Traps Need Fresh Bait*, 1967; *All Grass Isn't Green*, 1970.



# Copyright Information

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