

Billy Bathgate Short Guide

Billy Bathgate by E. L. Doctorow

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Characters

The title character of the novel is a boy from the East Bronx who takes his last name from a street near his home, Bathgate Avenue, which he calls "the street of plenty, the street of the fruits of the earth." Billy is very much a child of the street, and that is naturally where he looks for life and opportunity in his 1930s tenement neighborhood. He has not learned about selfreliance by reading Emerson and Thoreau; the experience of danger and temptation on the street has been his direct teacher. Billy is resourceful and daring because he needs these qualities to survive. He has to think and move quickly in a world that is seldom far from violence and death. The first scene of the novel shows Billy as a witness to the murder of a gang member whose feet are set in cement for a ritual drowning. Billy looks at one horror after another with the astonishment and fascination of a young Huck Finn trying to survive in a corrupt and depraved world. It is not surprising that he demonstrates an early talent for juggling and sleight-of-hand tricks.

Billy will soon learn to juggle the demands of competing gang members, not to mention his own need for recognition and reward. Agility of mind and body remain his best assets together with a strong imagination that appears to give him sympathy and understanding beyond his years. As the narrator looks back at his youth, however, he cannot fully recreate the lost innocence.

The dark center of the novel is Doctorow's portrait of the infamous Dutch Schultz. At times alternating between charm and murder, this character represents the heart of violence, corruption, and power. His selfish desires are unlimited, and his moods of sentimentality and vengeance are unpredictable. He rules a network of gangsters by the uncertainty of reward or terror. He sees young Billy as a "capable boy," and thus Billy becomes the apprentice and protege of this violent and doomed godfather. Dutch Schultz is being hunted down by the government as well as by a rival gangster, and the twists and turns of this double pursuit give the novel much of its tension and suspense. The end for Dutch Schultz is a scene of blood and horror.

Other characters in this rogues' gallery include Lulu Rosenkrantz, who kills whenever the mood strikes him, Irving, who is meticulous at everything from mixing cement to disposing of dead men, and Abbadabba Berman, who is the financial genius of the mob.

There is also Dutch Schultz's high-society mistress, who finds the time and desire to guide Billy in the rites of sexual and romantic initiation. The characters in Billy Bathgate only exist as the narrator is able to recollect them, but in this novel Doctorow is more successful than ever with his art of making characters appear to live and die.

Social Concerns/Themes

Doctorow again examines the meaning of success in America; if the leaders of American finance and industry were presented as caricatures of success in *Ragtime* (1975), another parody of the American Dream is featured in *Billy Bathgate*. The plot follows a young boy from rags to riches, but in this contemporary version of the Horatio Alger hero, the hero rises in the world as an apprentice to the notorious gangster, Dutch Schultz. The young hero in Doctorow's novel is as resourceful as any boy in Alger's fiction, but his enterprise is the business of the Mafia: rackets, vengeance, and murder. The story takes place in the New York underworld of the 1930s, and the title character is the reader's guide into this heart of darkness. His progressive initiation into horror is rendered by Doctorow as a bold and trenchant parody of the familiar American success story.

The economic concerns of America at the bottom of the Depression are suggested by the numbers and protection rackets manipulated by the mob.

Against this background of poverty and greed Doctorow pictures the American Dream as a nightmare that is fascinating, violent, and deadly.

Techniques

The narrative strategy of *Billy Bathgate* is to present everything through the memory of Billy himself. When this recollection takes place, however, or what Billy has become as an adult is never revealed. The point of view thus hovers somewhere between the author's vision in 1989 and the narrator's memory of himself as a boy in the 1930s. In this way Doctorow achieves a double sense of time lived and remembered.

What literary technique will render the underworld of Dutch Schultz in convincing detail? Doctorow typically chooses to combine history and fiction.

When facts are available to support his view of the 1930s, Doctorow includes them in the narrative. When other details are needed, however, he does not hesitate to invent them. The result is a seamless narrative that appears to convey a realistic picture of history as it is remembered by a particular observer and participant.

The language used by Doctorow for *Billy Bathgate* deserves praise for its richness and power. The words not only convey a clear and convincing impression of the world experienced by the young narrator, but they also have a lyric quality indicating that Billy, despite his apprenticeship to an underworld of crime and passion, or perhaps because of it, eventually becomes a poet.

Adaptations

Arlene Donovan and Robert F. Cokesberry produced a film version of *Billy Bathgate* in 1991. Despite a cast of stars including Dustin Hoffman and Nicole Kidman, the able direction of Robert Benton, and a screenplay written by Tom Stoppard, the film did not win critical awards or the approval of a wide audience. The novel is rich in images that are powerfully conveyed on film, but the quick mind of the narrator, which may be of chief interest to readers, is much less evident on the screen. The motion picture oddly resembles a parody of a gangster film. Its current availability in video format, however, does make this version a useful companion for the study of *Billy Bathgate*.



Key Questions

Questions about Doctorow's rendition of a gangster world, his parody of the American success story, and his indictment of the violence in the underworld of American society, are apt to stimulate a wide-ranging critical discussion of *Billy Bathgate*.

1. What qualities of mind and feeling does the author create for the title character and narrator of this novel?
2. How is sympathy maintained for Billy despite his involvement in the crime and violence of the underworld?
3. Given the terror of Billy's childhood, why doesn't the author reveal the scars of the adult narrator? Or is it better for Doctorow to leave the psychological consequences implicit in the recollections of the survivor?
4. How does the realistic style of this novel invoke the depths of American myth about crime families and material success?
5. What elements of *Billy Bathgate* are most available for a rendition on the screen, and where does the novel resist being turned into film action?
6. How believable are the gangster characters? Does the power of the narrative rely upon the fresh vision of the child witness?
7. What judgment is Doctorow making in *Billy Bathgate* about America's fascination with crime and violence?

Literary Precedents

The best known literary precedent is no doubt Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Cited in a famous remark by Ernest Hemingway as a major source for "all American literature," Twain's classic account of a young boy who must reckon with the moral problems of an adult world is certainly an important model for Doctorow. Billy follows in the footsteps of Huck Finn as a young witness to scenes of wrongdoing, violence, and death. There is even a pastoral interlude when Billy must pose as a respectable boy who attends Sunday School in a small upstate New York town. His adventures in the tradition of Huck Finn typically mirror the deceit and hypocrisy of the adult community.

Related Titles

Billy Bathgate is Doctorow's seventh novel, and it has much in common with his earlier work. An interplay of history and fiction, for example, is also explored in his novels from *The Book of Daniel* (1971) to *World's Fair* (1985).

Even his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), mixes facts about the American frontier with elements of myth and imagination. The history of a specific decade has often been the background for Doctorow's more recent fiction. *Ragtime*, for example, includes a chronicle of events for the decade leading up to World War I. *World's Fair*, the novel immediately prior to *Billy Bathgate*, similarly focuses on a poor section of New York in the 1930s.

History and fiction are so tightly interwoven in his novels that Doctorow likes to claim that "all of my inventions are quite true."

Doctorow's previous works also include a number of experiments with the perspective of a child narrator. *Ragtime* is told from the point of view of a small boy who has inherited the pieces of his family history. The narrative strategy of *World's Fair* also involves the recollection of childhood, and it is the impression of total recall that helps to make the novel a tour de force. Doctorow is therefore building upon his own record of achievement when he creates the narrative voice and action for *Billy Bathgate*.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994