

The Black Marble Short Guide

The Black Marble by Joseph Wambaugh

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Black Marble Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

The policeman, Andrei Mikhailovich Valnikov, is a product of his Russian heritage although he was born and bred in Los Angeles. He drinks Russian vodka, listens to Russian music, and dreams of Russian scenery. He is also an absentminded alcoholic whose former partner, Charlie Lightfoot, committed suicide and whose present partner, Natalie Zimmerman, thinks he is insane. He is, however, a very capable detective who sympathizes with the lonely losers of this world because he recognizes a bond with them.

Madeline Dills Whitfield is one of those unfortunates. She was born rich but her divorce and her mother's illness have used up her trust fund. She is now middle aged, and alone. Her only friend is her Schnauzer, Vicki.

When Vicki is stolen and held for a ransom she does not have the money to pay, her only hope is Valnikov.

He does help her, but he falls in love with Natalie, who is the one sane, organized and well-adjusted character in the novel. To her great surprise, she reciprocates, saving Valnikov's sanity and possibly his life.

Philo Skinner, the villain, is yet another loser. He has been beaten by bullies as a child, beaten up by rednecks in the army. His one moment of triumph occurs when he vanquishes Valnikov in a fight, and almost gets away from him, except that he slips on a pile of dog feces and is nearly torn to pieces by an attack animal.



Social Concerns/Themes

Joseph Wambaugh is primarily concerned with the emotional cost of being a policeman, but he widens his focus in this novel to include the loneliness of a socially well-connected but discarded wife and the world of championship show dogs. The 1990s have seen the Los Angeles Police Department achieve an unwelcome notoriety for racism, corruption, brutality, and incompetence. Wambaugh's 1970s novels — from *The New Centurions* to *The Black Marble* — provide in some way a relevant and prescient commentary on all of these aspects of the LAPD two decades later. Even the good cops of the novels are touched by these very infections, but few of them are irredeemable. Wambaugh's novels make the case — long before Rodney King and O. J. Simpson — that cops are mostly flawed good men dedicated to a dirty, impossible mission. The novels do not excuse racism, corruption, brutality and incompetence — Wambaugh's cops do not excuse it; but the novels do make the faults in some degree comprehensible as a reaction to the world which the policemen police.

Perhaps the most relevant of these novels is *The Blue Knight*, in which the central action involves an essentially good, tough old beat cop committing perjury in an effort to secure incarceration for a hardened criminal.

Techniques

This novel is structured differently from Wambaugh's earlier works. Here he focuses on one detective's case, making this more a mystery novel than a procedural novel. The cast of characters is more varied too, as the reader is introduced to the country club set, and the dog show world as well as to policemen, their families and their friends. The comedy in this novel is broader and more physical than in the earlier novels; it is often close to slapstick.

Adaptations

The Black Marble, which received excellent reviews, was released by Avco-Embassy in 1980. It starred Robert Foxworth as Andrei and Paula Prentiss as Nathalie. The film focuses on the dog-napping, and the romance between Andrei and Nathalie.

Literary Precedents

The *Black Marble* is in the tradition of the mystery novel, where by a combination of skill, luck and guile, the hero-detective solves the case. This genre originated in England with Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). It was continued in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's novels and short stories about the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Wambaugh's emphasis on the ugliness of the urban scene is also close to that of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, the French author of *Journey to the End of Night* (1932) and *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936).

Related Titles

Wambaugh's novels, *The Glitter Dome* (1981), *The Delta Star* (1983), and *The Secrets of Harry Bright* (1985) are also set in Wambaugh's new, wider world.

The reader is shown that the upper classes — Hollywood producers in *The Glitter Dome*, scientists in *The Delta Star*, and Palm Springs millionaires in *The Secrets of Harry Bright* — are as corrupt, crime-ridden, lonely and vulnerable as anyone else. Wambaugh's pictures of these worlds as they impinge on the consciousness of the lower-middleclass policeman is very effective.

His heroes are getting older in these books. They are excellent detectives but their jobs have taken their toll, turning them into emotional invalids.

Sidney Blackpool in *The Secrets of Harry Bright* and Mario Villalobos in *The Delta Star*, like Andrei Mikhailovich Valnikov in *The Black Marble*, are alcoholics, but excellent detectives nonetheless.

Even when they are redeemed by love and work and manage to salvage their lives, their innate goodness is highly vulnerable to the assaults of a vicious world. Sidney Blackpool in *The Secrets of Harry Bright*, is a bereaved father who is asked by another bereaved father to solve the murder of the latter's son. The psychological cost to the detective is nearly unbearable.

From *The Choirboys* on, Wambaugh's female characters become more differentiated and memorable. His policewomen are at least as capable as their male partners and far less emotionally vulnerable. His crime victims are often lonely women who bravely manage to survive.

Wambaugh has also written factual crime books. *The Onion Field* (1978) is a thorough dissection of an actual crime, the murder of a police officer. Wambaugh recreates the experiences of the victims, analyzes the background and motivation of the perpetrators, and lays out all the circumstances of the investigation and the trial, which was the longest criminal proceeding in California history. He demonstrates that the police, particularly the murdered officer's partner, suffered far more than the murderers. In the tradition of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), this book is as exciting as a novel, but much more dismaying as a picture of society.

In another nonfiction work *Lines and Shadows* (1984), Wambaugh tells the true story of a police unit formed to fight crime directed against illegal aliens in San Diego. It is a much less ambitious book than *The Onion Field*, but like all his work to date, also describes the pressures of police work on the police officers involved.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

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