

# The Blackboard Jungle Short Guide

## The Blackboard Jungle by Evan Hunter

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# Characters

The central character of *The Blackboard Jungle* is returning war veteran Rick Dadier who reluctantly accepts a teaching job at a vocational school because he cannot find a teaching job anywhere else. Like many other returning vets he is trying to re-integrate himself back into civilian life, start a family, and rejoin American society. However, like many others in his situation, he finds that the idealism of his youth, his vision of what America is supposed to be, clashes with the new realities of modern, urban life. The plot of the novel serves as a metaphor for the changed values many veterans discovered after the war. They went off to fight and their lives were put into a time warp. The youth that under normal circumstances would have been passed going to school, getting married, pursuing a conventional American life, was lost while they served the war effort. Life as they remembered it before the war did not match up to the one they found upon returning.

The school itself provides a microcosm for playing out the variety of aspirations of both the students and the teachers. It provides an environment Hunter would later use to such good effect in the 87th Precinct series.

The characters in this closed world present a cross section of human types.

There is Solly Kline, the cynic, who cannot see the potential in his students through their surface antagonism. He is burned-out as a teacher and mindlessly works to maintain some modicum of discipline and order much to the detriment of any educational program. Mike Angelico is the frustrated professional administrative assistant who harbors resentment over his missed promotion. The new principal, Mr. Small, has wide experience in vocational schools but lacks any real sense of what education is all about and wants to make North a model vocational school. He believes that his students lack any genuine academic talent. His task is to keep the current system running smoothly until he can be promoted on up the educational ladder.

The other new teacher is Lois Hammond, who dresses inappropriately in tight skirts and diaphanous blouses, and for all her apparent desires to help her students, including starting a school newspaper, seems to have little idea what her students are really like.

Her attempted rape, which is foiled by Rick, suggests the vulnerability of women in a predatory society. The reactions she elicits from the faculty are equally abhorrent as those she creates in the students; the only difference is they act out their lusts that her male colleagues only fantasize about.

The students in Dadier's class — they call him "Daddy-o" because they have difficulty pronouncing his French name — are the only ones individualized in the book. They conform largely to stereotypes of contemporary urban youth. After his initial confrontations with the class Rick is able to motivate them enough to become at least marginally engaged in the activities of the school. But he is also mugged and beaten, his new briefcase symbolically scuffed in the struggle, for stopping the rape of Miss



Hammond. The symbolically most significant confrontation occurs when Rick is knifed by two of the most recalcitrant boys, Wes and Belazi, and in front of the others he takes them to the principal's office for discipline. At the conclusion of the narrative Rick has discovered his real talent as a teacher in spite of his initial failures, and the novel ends on a hopeful note for the future of both the students and the educational system.

## Social Concerns

All of Hunter's books have a rich social atmosphere and none more so than the 1954 novel *The Blackboard Jungle*. In the early 1950s Americans developed a growing awareness of the rapid changes taking place in the nation's cities with the shift in ethnic populations, expanding government corruption, and increased crime, especially among the young. Teenagers and juvenile delinquency became a broadly discussed social problem. Everything from comic books, and popular music, to the movies was blamed for the accelerating breakdown of traditional social and family values and the shift in the behavior of the nation's young. *The Blackboard Jungle*, both as a novel and later as a successful film, dealt with this prominent issue in ways that dramatized the plight of both the juveniles and their adult supervisors.

By setting his novel in a mythical city vocational school, North Manual Trades High School, Hunter was able to focus on many of the root causes of the problem. The fictional school is the dumping ground for the city's most disruptive and incorrigible students.

They are the ones who have been written off by the system and have been unloaded onto the ill-prepared staff who see their tenure at North Manual as a sort of academic purgatory. Unequipped to deal with their students' increasingly aberrant behavior, the teachers resort to unworkable harsh measures which in turn only exacerbate the social and educational breakdown of the system.

Hunter was remarkably prescient in portraying the breakdown in the city schools long before the general public became aware of the gravity of the situation. His portrait of North Manual High contains all of the elements of social decay that have plagued city schools since the early 1950s. The novel's depiction of the urban school was so accurate that for years *The Blackboard Jungle* was assigned reading in schools of education across the country.

## Techniques

Hunter's prose is remarkably fluid and the novel, like all his others, is characterized by its smooth style. As one critic has pointed out, Hunter has a real eye, as well as ear, for dialogue.

That is, dialogue which scans well on the page. The novel, too, is realistically poetic. Hunter's descriptions of the city, of its atmosphere, and of the weather are evocative. His ability to call up the urban environment, which he would perfect in his later crime novels, is accomplished with precision and economy.

The narrative is also highly metaphoric and much of the novel's power comes from the social context created by the expansion of Hunter's vision into wider, contemporary cultural concerns. Through such narrative elements *The Blackboard Jungle* becomes more than just a novel of modern urban life and the decay of the cities after the second world war and is elevated to its place as a morality tale for postwar America.

# Themes

The main theme of the novel is the clash between a traditional American idealism which proclaims education the main goal and bulwark of a democratic society and the realities of what was happening in the city's schools after the war. For generations education had provided the entry into the American mainstream for countless millions of immigrants and offered the hope that with sufficient energy and dedication even the poor could rise from their poverty to become middleclass and prosperous. This myth of American life was centrally ingrained in the social fabric of the country. The war had also held out the promise of fuller participation in the nation's economic, if not social, structure to racial minorities and to women, who had been needed to work in the factories and to sustain the home front efforts while the men were away serving in the armed forces. Although little noticed at the time, this implicit contract and the temporary change in both gender roles and racial status accorded both groups during the war was responsible later for initiating the demands for social justice and reform which erupted in the civil rights movement of the mid-1950s and the woman's movement of the 1960s.

Hunter's novel, however, depicted a real world in which the idealism of American education confronted the grim truths of an educational system ill-equipped to deliver the necessary skills to a new generation of urban youth both alienated from the decaying environment of the city and from the ideals of the American Dream. *The Blackboard Jungle* was one of the first works of fiction to grapple with these problems and to articulate the discrepancies between what the culture promised to deliver and in fact, what it could deliver. The teachers of North Manual High have not been equipped either by training or by temperament to adequately cope with the multitude of outside problems which afflict their students and impede the educational process they were trained to effectuate.

The students, too, do not bring to the school anything resembling the goals and discipline necessary for success as it had been conventionally defined by the school system. This disjuncture causes the central tension in the book and provides it with its narrative power.

*The Blackboard Jungle* is a study of the schools and the city environment which is even-handed in its appraisal.

Although Hunter utilizes conventional fictional devices in his characterization, he also avoids easy judgments of both groups. The teachers, especially in the central character of Rich Dadier, are presented as a mixed lot, containing a measure of genuine commitment to their profession and as well as a genuine confusion about why they are unable to effect the changes in the students which would allow them to escape the stifling conditions of their lives. And the students are also differentiated, some engaged and hardworking, others disaffected and uncooperative.

# Adaptations

The *Blackboard Jungle* was made into a successful movie which faithfully adapted the original novel. Directed by Richard Brooks and starring Glenn Ford, Anne Francis, Louis Calhern and featuring an ensemble cast of newcomers as the students which included Sidney Poitier (who would later star in a British version of same sort of urban school drama, *To Sir With Love*), Vic Morrow, Richard Kiley, and Paul Mazursky (also later a director of urban movies). The film was released in 1955.

The prominence of the film did much to advance Hunter's career through publicizing the novel, and it marked the beginning of Hunter's independence as a writer.





## Key Questions

Although many of the attitudes and values of the novel remain firmly situated in the 1950s, because of the timeliness of its subject matter, the novel really does not read as a period piece.

Although urban schools have become much worse than the fictional North Manual Trades High School many of the same problems that Hunter depicted remain current today, as do the issues the novel raises about the difficulties of teaching in the inner-city.

Also, since the book raises all sorts of social questions about post-war American society, many of which remain with us today, the book can evoke a lively discussion of contemporary problems.

1. What issues raised by *The Blackboard Jungle* remain with us?
2. View the film of the novel and discuss how the movie highlights the events and issues of the novel differently. What does this say about how Hollywood treats social problems?
3. What is the place of education in our modern world? How might we as a society overcome the discrepancies between what the culture says about its importance with the realities of life?
4. Compare how youth is depicted in the novel with contemporary media representations.
5. What does the novel do with the urban environment? How is it rendered and what does it say about traditional American values and myths?
6. In the 1950s and 1960s there were a number of youth rebellion films, the most famous probably being *Rebel Without a Cause*. In your discussion of Hunter's novel the group might compare his treatment of the rebellious youth with that portrayed in these films.
7. The view of the city depicted in the novel is not a very flattering one, but it is consistent with other such renderings in American fiction. Compare Hunter's city with other writers' views of the urban environment.
8. From the earliest days in American writing, in Edward Eggleston's *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, for example, American fiction has portrayed school teachers. Think about how Hunter's teachers both rely on this tradition and break with it.
9. If the readers know Evan Hunter's *Ed McBain* novels they may wish to compare *The Blackboard Jungle* with some of the *87th Precinct* novels to see how under a different genre Hunter works with an urban environment and a close-knit group of professionals.

10. In what ways is *The Blackboard Jungle* a dated novel? How has American society moved on from Hunter's depiction of it here?

# Literary Precedents

There is little that can be compared to this novel. It really is among the first of the books of the 1950s to explore its subject and anticipate the plight that the cities would experience in greater severity in the coming years.

Many other books about city schools followed such as Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase* (1965) but few preceded *The Blackboard Jungle*.

## Related Titles

Hunter would follow up this early novel with *A Matter of Conviction* (1959), which also deals with juvenile delinquents, and a collection of stories, *The Jungle Kids* (1956). The urban environment and closed world of professionals operating in the city later became the setting for the 87th Precinct series where Hunter once again explored urban decay and the plight of those who live in such debilitating surroundings.



# Copyright Information

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