

The Burglar in the Library Short Guide

The Burglar in the Library by Lawrence Block

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Characters

Bernie Rhodenbarr is the title character in the Burglar series, one who has attempted to go straight by buying a used book store in Manhattan and by spending quiet days with his cat Raffles, who has no tail. (Raffles is named for a famous rogue in stories by E. W. Hornung.) Like Bernie, the original Raffles was a thief and an accomplished safe-cracker. Every day Bernie and his friend Carolyn eat lunch together and talk over the events of their lives. Carolyn is a lesbian, and she recounts to Bernie her triumphs and frustrations in the dating scene. Bernie tells Carolyn about his romantic adventures and about his sales in the shop or his burglaries. Raffles chases crumpled paper thrown for him, and he catches mice to earn his keep at the book store.

In the series, either someone who is venial forces Bernie to commit another robbery or Bernie gets tempted to use his skills to gain for himself the good life.

Bernie is often characterized as an underdog, harried by villains with more power than he has. He is also made sympathetic by his use of wisecracking, rather than anger. His humor is often self-deprecating. He is a non-violent criminal who makes an interesting companion, laidback and funny.

Another important character in this book is Lettice Runcible, Bernie's lover, who deserted him suddenly to marry another man. When Lettice, whom Bernie had invited to Cuttleford House, turns up there on her honeymoon, one learns that Lettice's sexual morals are shockingly lax as she seduces Bernie. Of course, her attraction to Bernie may testify to his being irresistible, but in other novels in the series, some women do resist him successfully. (He is not James Bond.)

Lettice is a femme fatale, a character out of a hard-boiled mystery, the immoral woman who tempts the hero with sex and the promise of money. In the end of the book with Bernie—and Carolyn—back in the city, the mystery reverts to the hard-boiled form.

Characterization is not the strongest element of the English country house mysteries: the puzzle and the detective are. Here the characters are lightly sketched and are mostly types. Nigel Eglantine and his wife Cissy are the innkeepers. Nigel is a boozy, genial host and Cissy wants everybody to be nice and the murderer to be a passing tramp. The parents of the precocious Millicent, Mr. Greg and Mrs. Leona Savage are nonentities. They allow Millicent to stay in a separate bedroom alone while the murderer is on the premises (so that she can roam around and further the twists of the plot). Orris, the handyman, and the two Cobbet cousins, Molly and Earlene, the maids, are stereotypes of inbred country folk. Dakin Littlefield, Lettice's husband, is characterized by his "cruel mouth" and his sneering tone but little else.

Colonel Blount-Buller is a bluff ex-military man, a Colonel Blimp type. Miss Dinmont is the invalid in the wheelchair, and her companion is Miss Hardesty.

(Carolyn concludes that they are gay.)



Gordon Wolpert is fiftyish and he picks at his food. Jonathan Rathburn seems intense. Rufus Quilp is the fat man. Mrs. Colibri insists on her privacy even with a killer on the loose. The Cook does not even get a name. All the characters—except Bernie and Carolyn—are there as suspects or victims. There is no in-depth analysis of them as individuals because Block is parodying the classic English country house mystery like those by Agatha Christie.



Social Concerns

At first glance, social concerns are not an important matter in this "Burglar" mystery, although they do play a role in other mysteries in the series. The villains are often cheaters, people who want to profit twice, for example, by gouging insurance companies. They claim as stolen items they did not have or that they have already disposed of. These villains are also usually egotistical people who are power-mad and excessive in their demands on society and on life. The detective Bernie is a contrast because his ambitions and demands recognize some limits.

He would like some trappings of the good life, like the ownership of his store and of an original Mondrian painting, something that makes him happy. But day to day he lives quietly selling books.

The Burglar in the Library satirizes the English country house mystery by playing up its artificiality. A very strong focus in the classic English mystery was the puzzle element so to make the puzzle difficult to solve, characterization and even plot were sometimes farfetched. In this Burglar mystery, the murder weapon is an unusual instrument, tropical fish, a clear satire on the earlier genre. The murderer in this mystery is greedy, and he or she seemingly has no respect for human life; he kills strangers and is ready to kill someone close to him. Again the murderer is contrasted with Bernie, who sees intimacy as involving a different basis to a relationship, one that presumes responsibility and consideration.



Techniques

One of the major games in *The Burglar in the Library* is the parody of the English country house mystery. When Lettice, who has been Bernie's lover, refuses his invitation to Cuttleford House, an imitation English inn in Connecticut, Bernie decides to take Carolyn as his date to make him look like half of a vacationing couple. Bernie believes that the inn contains the ultimate association copy, one of *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler (1939; see separate entry), inscribed by both Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Both men wrote classic, hard-boiled mysteries.

Bernie wants to steal the copy to confirm that it exists and to have the thrill of owning it. He also mulls over the possibility of selling it and making a pretty penny for himself. Bernie and Carolyn talk over features of the English country house mystery as well as characteristics of the hard-boiled thriller. Most of the discussion is accomplished through jokes, which are often expressed in puns and other word play. They make the reader think of other mysteries and a literary framework, not the pretense of realism.

When guests and employees at the inn start dying, Bernie and Carolyn try to figure out what is happening by resorting to their knowledge of the two types of mysteries.

In *The Oxford Book of English Detective Stories* (1992), Patricia Craig names three features of the classic English mystery as a preeminent puzzle, an interesting detective, and a fascinating method of investigation. In *The Burglar in the Library*, the puzzle is who is murdering a series of people at Cuttleford House. Bernie and Carolyn are the wisecracking detectives, and their method of investigation is bumbling and being as amateur as possible.

They consult their knowledge of mysteries—after all Bernie is a burglar—but the two urban types are out of their element in the country house genre. At this juncture, the detectives are playing against the stereotype of the infallible detective like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot.

Here Bernie makes almost as many wrong deductions as Carolyn, who sometimes acts as his inquisitive Watson. Although in the English country house mystery the detective knows everything, in the hard-boiled American mystery sometimes the detective (and even the author) do not know who killed the victim or why. Another premise of some English mysteries is that the remaining people—after a murder has occurred—cannot escape the location of the killings.

Here snow, cut phone lines, and a bridge that is sabotaged cut off the inn guests from the rest of the world. Obviously in the city such isolation would be impossible, an argument against staying at the pseudo-English inn in the first place. The tone in English country house mysteries is supposed to be blithe, offhand, and insouciant, according to Patricia Craig. Here it is jokey. For example, Bernie tells Millicent Savage, a little girl, that he is a burglar because he fears telling people that he is a book seller in case the innkeepers eventually discover that he has stolen their copy of *The Big Sleep*. He finally



tells people that he is unemployed, temporarily helping Carolyn in the dog grooming shop.

Another feature of the English country house murder is an unusual weapon. In the first murder, the victim is hit on the head by the statue of a camel and then smothered by a pillow. Bernie and Carolyn keep saying that he was killed by a camel and a pillow, something that sounds absurd. In several English mysteries the killer was someone who was discounted because she was in a wheelchair.

The detective finally deduced that she actually could walk and identified her as the killer. In *The Burglar in the Library*, the child Millicent sees the woman in the wheelchair dance naked around her room, but that disguised ability has nothing to do with the murders, and the fact is not alluded to again. It is a red herring, another feature of the classic English mystery.

A standard ploy in detective stories is the detective's pretending to be dead, another victim of the killer. The device allows the detective to disappear and to have time to investigate without people checking on his or her whereabouts. In this mystery a detective has time to search the house.

Themes

A continuing theme in the series is friendship, in particular the unlikely friendship between Bernie Rhodenbarr, the burglar, and Carolyn Kaiser, the lesbian dog groomer. They share time and ideas with each other, and they are considerate of each other's foibles. For example, Carolyn recognizes clues to Bernie's behavior in his drinking habits: if he drinks mineral water in the evening, he is probably working as a burglar that night.

She may ask him about his plans but only if they are alone together. They are an integral part of each other's lives. In *The Burglar in the Library*, they share a bed, and Bernie knows not to tell Carolyn of her behavior when she was dreaming, certainly a vulnerable state. To hold a mirror up to one friend's sexual behavior is not always appreciated.

A usual theme is urbanity, a style of life in the city, a sophistication. Here urbanity is missing except in the major characters, Carolyn and Bernie, who make jokes against pretentiousness. A contrasting style is the niceness of the country house milieu that is too restricted and that is finally false.



Key Questions

A context in which to discuss *The Burglar in the Library* is the golden age of British detective writing including such writers as Dorothy Sayers, Carter Dickson, and Agatha Christie. Another context is the hard-boiled American mysteries by writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. *The Burglar in the Library* would qualify as a postmodern book, parodying the work of earlier writers. The imitation is achieved in the spirit of tribute as well as critique. A playful spirit animates the parodies.

1. Many fantasy and science fiction books situate their major characters in a totally unfamiliar environment (distant in time or space) to see how they can adapt.

What strategies do Bernie and Carolyn employ to make sense of the literary world they are landed in? Do they most resemble Millicent the child in being able to see through some of the conventions and yet in realizing that they do not control this strange environment?

2. If Lettice and Carolyn are polar opposites as characters, what are the images and roles of the other female characters?

3. Humor can be seen as a curious addition to the mystery form (with violence and corpses strewn about), and yet the history of the form has often included jokes and humor. What is the function of the humor? What are the specific targets of humor in *The Burglar in the Library*? Why is it funny?

4. Poetic justice involves characters getting their just reward. Does Bernie deserve his fate in the book or does he deserve to be punished as a burglar? On what grounds can Bernie be excused for his larceny if you think he should be excused? Does the author manipulate circumstances to get the reader to like and excuse Bernie?

5. Carolyn, the lesbian dog groomer, has been a character in the *Burglar* series since the 1970s. Is she a caricature or a realistic portrayal? Is her lesbianism incidental to the mystery and to her function as Bernie's friend, or is it important that she and Bernie not have sexual attraction?

6. Throughout literature British writers—including Shakespeare—have made fun of country people. On the other hand, Mark Twain usually has the country person outwit the city slicker. What is the American tradition of country versus city? Are the charges against the country people in *The Burglar in the Library* familiar?

Literary Precedents

A distant ancestor of Bernie Rhodenbarr may be Robin Hood, but Bernie really steals for himself or his friends or to get himself out of trouble. A closer ancestor is A. F. Raffles, a gentleman jewel thief in England, created by E. W. Hornung, the brother-in-law of Arthur Conan Doyle. The Saint, named Simon Templar, created by Leslie Charteris, is another good thief, who later in his career becomes a spy and a patriot. To Catch a Thief, first a motion picture (1955) with Cary Grant and then a television series involved a jewel thief, turned detective.

Some of Donald Westlake's novels, caper books, also feature the adventures of thieves, trying to make the big score.

This particular Burglar mystery situates itself in the framework of postmodernism in its heavy, self-conscious use of parody.

Here Block is parodying especially Agatha Christie as a writer of the English country house genre. The title *The Burglar in the Library* echoes Christie's tide, *The Body in the Library* (1942). The two faintly comic maids of the Bantry household seem to be repeated and amplified in the two Cobbet cousins, maids in this Burglar mystery. *The Body in the Library* also includes a character in a wheelchair, but in Christie's mystery he is not the killer (and he cannot get up and walk) so he is not the example of a red herring as Bernie and Carolyn discuss it. *The Burglar in the Library* also seems to imitate Christie's *Ten Little Indians* (1939), also published as *And Then There Were None*. The common tactic is the elimination of the characters, one after another by the unknown killer.

Unlike Christie, Block stops before all the characters have been killed. (Another example of the artificiality of some of the English classic mysteries is that in *Ten Little Indians*, the killer is someone who combines a strict morality with a love of killing, an unusual psychological profile.

The killer is a well respected judge, unhinged by his having a fatal disease. His elaborate plotting and the device to get the story to the audience are both artificial.) Having people trapped in a location they cannot escape is a variation on the "locked room" strategy, one that restricts access. Another repeated element from Christie to Block is the description of a character as having a cruel mouth. Bernie draws the remark to the reader's attention by doubting that it has any objective meaning.

Related Titles

The Burglar in the Library is more overtly a parody than the other Burglar mysteries. Parody, of course, is imitation and this mystery is combining the imitation of the English country house mystery and the American urban hard-boiled detective story. (Another postmodern technique is to cross lines and combine forms.)

Postmodern parody can be utilized to criticize the originals, to celebrate them, or to combine both purposes.



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