

The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza Short Guide

The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza by Lawrence Block

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Characters

Bernie Rhodenbarr, the protagonist of Lawrence Sanders's *The Burglar Who . . .* series, is a man liked by his neighbors even though they know that he occasionally robs people, but only those rich "momsers" across town.

Because of his occupation, people seek him out and force him to use his skills for their benefit or to make him into a scapegoat for their iniquities. Even the cops admit that Bernie has never been known to be violent. He is a gentleman and a burglar so neat that his victims do not realize at first that he has been on their premises. Another of Bernie's virtues is his sense of humor. He makes silly jokes to his friend Carolyn, and he can also laugh at himself.

Because Carolyn is lesbian, the possibility of a sexual relationship between the protagonist and his sidekick is removed, which releases her from the usual feminine stereotype in some mystery fiction. Carolyn speculates about the sexual orientation of women she sees around, goes out to gay singles bars, and complains about her sex life. Her job as a dog groomer is not glamorous, but like Bernie, she is her own boss, an individual who makes her living by exercising a skill. Like Bernie, she has a sense of style. She is resourceful and loyal when Bernie needs help to stay out of jail. She is rowdier than he, but game for a challenge or an adventure.

The villains of the series are violent.

When they kill people, they often beat them to death. The killers are usually amateur criminals, killing for personal reasons, for personal gain. They are usually rich, successful, and greedy.

They are collectors who want to possess things; Bernie says that he has no guilt robbing collectors. They deserve to learn that they cannot lock things up and keep them forever for their own use.

Other women characters provide a romantic interest for Bernie, sometimes a friend to help with an alibi or to help in a caper, like the artist, Denise.

Sometimes the woman is one he has met on a case, with an attraction igniting between them. If the woman wants to go back to her regular life, Bernie lets go gracefully.



Social Concerns/Themes

The social concerns, which serve as background rather than foreground, include the corruption and dissolution of urban life. In the Burglar series, a central theme is the skill of the professional, the individual who is differentiated from the masses by his cleverness and the special abilities that he has developed and perfected. The individual, Bernie Rhodenbarr, is a skilled burglar and safe-cracker, someone at the top of the criminal hierarchy. Bernie successfully copes with the complexity and the corruption of the city around him, and he triumphs in having a personal life that is warm and sustained and varied and interesting. The central friendship in the series is an unlikely one between Bernie, the burglar, and Carolyn, the lesbian dog groomer. In *The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza*, that friendship involves sharing Bernie's work, with Carolyn sometimes called Bernie's partner and sometimes his henchperson. Despite the world around them, they survive and sometimes flourish.

Techniques

The Bernie Rhodenbarr mysteries are caper books, adventures that begin with a plan involving action and suspense and complex effort to attain some kind of treasure or score. The caper is usually one of Bernie's burglaries, and the plan is complicated further when a villain tries to implicate Bernie in a crime he did not perpetrate, usually a murder. To extricate himself, Bernie has to solve the case, manufacture evidence, or at least point out to the police where to look for the relevant evidence. A further complication is the pressure put on Bernie by Ray, the best cop money can buy, to get Bernie to steal for him (for example, a fur coat for Ray's wife) or to give Ray a cut, usually of a score that Bernie has not made. Ray must be appeased, paid off, and usually given credit for the police case that Bernie has solved.

Aside from the original burglary, of someone who will overclaim the loss on his insurance or of someone who got the goods illegally in the first place, Bernie's activities in the books are mostly defensive, trying to escape the trouble that the crooked system is making for him.

Bernie is trying to survive, to get along, to have some thrills (like breaking into someone else's apartment), to have something beautiful (like a painting by Mondrian), to have some money so that he does not have to overexert himself to make a living, so that he can live at a leisurely, civilized pace. He is trying to attain the good life.

Literary Precedents

In one sense, Bernie, the good thief, is a "hipper," streetwise version of Robin Hood. He is someone who goes outside the law and is sanctioned by society to exercise his true talents, in opposition to the corrupt, illegitimate establishment. On the other hand, Bernie does not rob the rich to give to the poor; he robs for his own too-poor self or for a friend in trouble (such as Carolyn whose cat has been kidnapped).

Other literary ancestors of Bernie include A. F. Raffles, gentleman jewel thief, created by E. W. Hornung, and the Saint, Simon Templar, who acts outside the law to right injustices. The Saint was created by Leslie Charteris.

Another gentleman jewel thief was the hero of *To Catch a Thief*, first a film and then a very different television series.

Other caper books that combine adventure and humor include some of Donald Westlake's novels.

Related Titles

Bernie Rhodenbarr mystery novels include *Burglars Can't Be Choosers*, 1977; *The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling*, 1979; *The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza*, 1981; *The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian*, 1986; *The Burglar Who traded Ted Williams*, 1994; *The Burglar in the Closet*, 1995; and *The Burglar Who Thought He was Bogart*, 1995.



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