The Cat Who Blew the Whistle Short Guide

The Cat Who Blew the Whistle by Lilian Jackson Braun

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Contents

Characters

Generally Braun introduces her characters with a rather sketchy physical description and allows their behavioral quirks to reveal their personality.

Three types of characters appear in her novels. Some individuals serve as background characters, reappearing in novel after novel; they constitute the community in which Qwill and the cats live. A major element in these novels' appeal is the reader's sense that these familiar characters are friends and neighbors. Most of these people have played a major or minor role in an earlier novel, then settled into a specific niche so far as Qwill and Moose County are concerned; thus, the reader comes to know them gradually, more or less as a neighbor would. Other characters are major participants in the action of a specific novel; upon their first appearance, Qwill notices their dominant physical traits and usually makes some judgments about their personality. They may reappear in subsequent novels as background characters, and occasionally one of them becomes the victim or villain in a later novel. Third are the victims and villains, most of whom are dead or incarcerated by the novel's end.

Familiar characters in this novel include Qwill's lifelong friend, Arch Riker (initially Qwill's editor on the Daily Fluxion and now publisher of the Moose County Something) and Riker's wife, Mildred; Riker appears in all The Cat Who novels, and Mildred (nee Hanstable), introduced as a significant character in The Cat Who Played Brahms, has appeared as a background character in the subsequent novels, especially since her marriage to Arch. Polly Duncan, the Pickax City librarian, has been a significant part of Qwill's life since The Cat Who Knew Shakespeare, but in The Cat Who Blew the Whistle, her obsession with the building of her new house irks Qwill and causes him to exclude her from most of his activities.

Nevertheless, she is literally conspicuous by her absence, and Bootsie, her Siamese, continues to serve as a foil for KoKo and Yum Yum. Among the other recurring characters are Andy Brodie (the local police chief) and his daughter Fran (an interior designer), Hixie Rice (advertising manager of The Moose County Something), Junior Goodwinter (the newspaper's editor), Dwight Sommers (a local public relations man and the publicist for the Party Train), and the Lanspeaks, whose daughter is the new physician in Pickax City.

Characters from earlier novels who seem to have become part of the Moose County community include Elizabeth Hart (the Appelhardt heiress Qwill rescued in The Cat Who Came to Breakfast), Derek Cuttlebrink (the waiter/ actor who has played minor roles in several earlier novels), Dr. Herbert (a local physician), Celia Robinson (Qwill's "special agent" in The Cat Who Went into the Closet, who reprises that role in this novel), and Homer Tibbitt (the octogenarian local historian who repeatedly supplies the vital historical link). Characters who play only minor roles in this novel but seem destined to become significant in future novels are Celia Robinson's grandson Clayton, Polly's assistant Virginia Alstock, and Qwill's handyman Mr. O'Dell.

The Cat Who Blew the Whistle involves primarily the fate of the Trevelyan family. Initially Qwill interviews Floyd Trevelyan, who is one of the "hairy Welshmen" typically found in Sawdust City. Braun's physical description establishes him as a suspicious character.

FT, as he is generally known, is "seriously balding toward the brow," but his head is "rimmed with bushy black hair," and though his "jutting jaw" is clean-shaven, his crumpled shorts and tank top reveal arms, legs and a back that are "thickly furred." Floyd is a self-made man: the captain of the local high school football team, he started working as a carpenter, became a contractor, and — after he made millions — opened the Lumbertown Credit Union in Sawdust City. While his boyish enthusiasm for railroads is initially appealing, Floyd's treatment of his wife suggests the arrogance and cruelty of which he is capable.

Edward Penn Trevelyan, or Eddie, physically resembles his father, with the black Trevelyan hairiness clearly visible above the jeans and tank top he regularly wears. His mop of black hair and unkempt beard make him appear sloppy, but he is a craftsman and a careful builder, frequently calculating detailed measurements with a pencil, which he sharpens often. Like his mother and sister, he bitterly resents Floyd's control of his life; thus, he is an easy mark for the financial schemes of Nella Harper, who promises him enough money to establish an independent career. His deathbed confession clears up most of the remaining questions about the two murders.

In contrast to his opinion of the Trevelyan men, Qwill feels sympathy for the Trevelyan women. Florrie Penn Trevelyan was a starry-eyed young girl when she defied her father to marry Floyd, but now Floyd virtually ignores her, and his contempt has made her faded and nervous, a physical wreck at about forty years of age. She believes that unless she can escape Floyd and seek medical treatment in Europe, she will soon die. Her daughter, Letitia Penn Trevelyan, not only despises Floyd for his treatment of Florrie, but also chafes under Floyd's domination of her own life. In articles published in the Moose County Something, Letitia refuses to use the Trevelyan name. She is bitter because she wanted to attend college and become a writer, but Floyd insisted that she remain at home as bookkeeper for his credit union. Thus, when Nella Harper approaches these two women with a supposedly legal scheme to divert some of Floyd's money for their use, they readily agree and, in fact, consider Nella an angel.

Qwill also seems to admire the retired railroad engineer, Oswald (Ozzie) Penn. Penn is described as a big, husky man, though slightly stooped; during the excitement of the train excursion, his face was ruddy, but when Qwill visits him at the Railroad Retirement Center, it seems gray and weary. At the time of his daughter's wedding, Ozzie was a headstrong and vengeful man, refusing to attend or allow his wife to attend. For years he also forbade any contact with Florrie or her children, but now he is eighty-four years old, his wife has been dead for nine years, and he has no other family. When Qwill suggests a reconciliation, Ozzie seeks to compensate for his earlier neglect by helping his daughter and his granddaughter financially. When he buys old Engine No. 9, he assumes responsibility for the wreck he is planning, and he guarantees that Florrie will receive his savings. Ozzie plans to make his death the subject of railroad legend, and Qwill's folk ballad seems destined to help him achieve his goal.

One of the murder victims is Eddie Trevelyan's lifelong friend, James Henry Ducker, known as Benno. Qwill is immediately suspicious of this short, stocky, pony-tailed carpenter from Chipmunk Township, one of the rougher areas in the county. When Benno is stabbed at a local tavern, most people erroneously assume that the death is drug-related.

Although seen only during the party train excursion, Lionella Harper is also an important character because she is the mastermind of the entire plot.

Through her business expertise, she manages to gain Floyd's trust, but at the same time she establishes herself as Letitia's best friend and Eddie's mentor. Once she has manipulated the accounts and anonymously reported the irregularities to banking authorities, she leaves town, making Floyd appear to be the thief.

Social Concerns

As The Cat Who Blew the Whistle begins, Qwill and the Siamese have recently returned from Breakfast Island (The Cat Who Came to Breakfast), and the preceding novel's conflict between historical preservation and modern commercial development continues in this novel. As usual, Qwill works to find worthwhile modern uses which will allow him to preserve genuinely significant historic structures, just as he has adapted the old Goodwinter Boulevard mansions to house Moose County Community College and restored an old apple barn to create ideal living quarters for himself and the cats.

Nature, too, seems to resist development; when Edward Penn Trevelyan bulldozes a part of the orchard, he is attacked by the great horned owl Qwill calls Marconi.

Murder is always present in The Cat Who mysteries, but in this novel underlying issues are fiscal mismanagement at the Lumbertown Credit Union, the sale of drugs in Moose County, and the warehousing of senior citizens in retirement centers. Nella Harper's financial manipulations result in a scandal which appears modeled on the savingsand-loan scandals of the 1980s. Also seemingly drawn from recent headlines is Andrew Brodie's concern about the violence brought into Moose County by drug dealers such as Benno Ducker.

Yet another problem for Brodie is the serious train wreck that occurs when several of the retired railroad men decide to reenact the famous wreck of a runaway train at South Fork. Apparently bored by their routine existence at the Railroad Retirement Center in Sawdust City, about forty of these former railroad men choose to accompany Ozzie Penn and make one last jump from a speeding train.

Techniques

The Cat Who Blew the Whistle opens with a scene on board Floyd Trevelyan's Lumbertown party train, then moves backward in time to explain how Qwill and his fellow Moose Countians came to be on the excursion.

This essentially theatrical approach is characteristic of Braun, as is the sequence of dramatic scenes through which the plot unfolds. Like all the novels in this series, The Cat Who Blew the Whistle is also characterized by fastpaced action described with a reporter's eye for vivid detail and a discerning listener's keen ear for language, especially the dialect Qwill calls Old Moose and the distinctive jargon of the retired railroad men.

As has been the case with all the series since The Cat Who Played Brahms, the symbolic center of this novel is Moose County, an essentially self-contained community "400 miles north of everywhere." The residents consider their area healthier, cleaner, and generally superior to anything "Down Below"; in fact, they are grateful for their good fortune in living in Moose County. Readers too seem to find in this sense of a close-knit community one of the series' strongest appeals, and with each novel, Braun introduces a new section of the county. Nevertheless, as The Cat Who novels clearly demonstrate, human nature is more or less the same everywhere, and Moose County is not immune from the crime and violence found in cities to the south. In fact, because the community is relatively small, most of the characters know many details about their neighbors' lives, past and present; so the villain is likely to be at least an acquaintance, and the violence seems almost familial.

The sense of family is also a key element in Qwill's relationship with KoKo and Yum Yum. From the time he thought he had lost them (in The Cat Who Saw Red, please see separate entry), Qwill has realized that the Siamese are truly his family. KoKo especially is also still his partner in solving the novel's two murders. Once again, KoKo and Yum Yum employ their familiar devices in order to reveal clues; their actions are always consistent with feline behavior, but when KoKo breaks the English pencil box and when the two Siamese position themselves among the duck decoys, the alert reader knows that proper interpretation of these clues will enable Qwill to solve the mysteries.

A new element in The Cat Who Blew the Whistle is that, for the first time, Qwill employs an agent. Celia Robinson, whose information helped him solve the murder of her friend Euphonia Gage (The Cat Who Went into the Closet), decides to move to Pickax City, and Qwill enlists her aid in keeping an eye on Florrie and Letitia Trevelyan.

As Celia becomes a part of the household, however, she learns many of the details which enable Qwill to solve the case.

Themes

The central theme of The Cat Who Blew the Whistle is Braun's recurring theme of the individual's relationships with community, friends, and family.

To some extent, Floyd Trevelyan may be considered a foil for Qwill, as his position in Sawdust City parallels Qwill's role in Pickax City, but Floyd represents a less altruistic type of community leader. Each of these two men is admired, respected, and trusted by his fellow citizens. For example, the people of Sawdust City continue to believe in Floyd's innocence, even after all the evidence suggests that he has defrauded them. The residents of Pickax City display a similar faith in Qwill, frequently seeking his advice and eagerly suggesting stories for his newspaper column. The attitudes of the two men are markedly different, however.

Floyd is vain and self-centered, with little genuine concern for the needs or feelings of others. All his actions are calculated to increase his own status, rather than to improve conditions in his community. In contrast, Qwill has little interest in status; he has used his wealth to establish a community college, build a theater and an art museum, and support worthwhile civic projects.

Friendship seems to be a particularly fragile connection in this novel.

Nella Harper pretends to befriend Letitia and Eddie only so she can betray their trust, as well as Floyd's, and steal the assets of the Lumbertown Credit Union. Lifelong friendships too can prove unstable; for instance, Benno and Eddie violently turn on each other.

Even Polly Duncan and Qwill experience difficulty in their relationship for the first time, as the stress of building her new house makes Polly annoyingly remote, distracted, and nervous. When Qwill responds by becoming secretive and distant, they are forced to re-evaluate their relationship. Because their friendship is based upon affection and mutual respect, however, it survives this crisis.

This novel continues the theme of the dysfunctional family, especially as it contrasts with the cohesive family unit composed of Qwill and the Siamese. Like the Appelhardts of The Cat Who Came to Breakfast (1994), the Trevelyans are a family in conflict. Floyd Trevelyan, whose love of railroads is actually an obsession, married Florrie Penn only because she was the daughter of Ozzie Penn, a well-known local engineer. When they were married "in the cab of a steam locomotive, with everyone wearing coveralls and railroad caps — even the bride and the preacher," Ozzie was so offended that he and Florrie's mother refused to attend or to have any further contact with Florrie, Floyd, and their children.

When Floyd became wealthy, he began to treat Florrie with contempt; and his children, Letitia and Eddie, not only grew to hate him, but actually plotted with Nella Harper to

embezzle funds from the Lumbertown Credit Union, which Floyd owns. The extent of Eddie's ill feelings toward his father is revealed only when the entire mystery is solved.

An underlying theme in this novel is nostalgia for an idealized past. The popularity of the Lumbertown party train is based upon the public's fondness for the novelty of reenacting oldtime railroad travel, but with conveniences such as gourmet food. A television crew from Minneapolis films the excursion, and Floyd Trevelyan's passengers pay to ride the train because they, like Floyd himself, are caught up in the romance of the steam locomotive.

This novel also explores the way tales of historical events develop into legends. After years of repeated telling, the story of the runaway train that wrecked on the curve at South Fork has become the most important local legend. Thus, when Ozzie Penn wants to end his life in a final blaze of glory, he decides to reenact the crash, using Engine No. 9 and the Lumbertown party train. Realizing Ozzie's intent, Qwill writes, and gives to a local musician, a ballad which helps to create a new legend of the courageous engineer who would rather die than retire.

Key Questions

Frequently, reviewers comment upon Braun's technique of addressing contemporary social issues in her mysteries. For example, The Cat Who Moved a Mountain (1992) raises the question of real estate development versus preservation of the natural environment, a subject that also figures prominently in The Cat Who Came to Breakfast. In The Cat Who Blew the Whistle, Braun focuses upon the dysfunctional family, portraying three generations of one such family. Discussion groups might want to analyze the effects of authoritarian (and psychologically abusive parenting) as seen in Florrie Penn Trevelyan's estrangement from her father, Ozzie, and in the hostility of Letitia and Eddie toward their father, Floyd Trevelyan.

Discussants could also consider the effect of such parent/child relationships upon the type of spouse abuse Floyd inflicts upon Florrie, and which Ozzie seems to have inflicted upon Mrs. Penn. The contrast between these families and Quill's Siamese family also merits attention.

A second concern raised in this novel in society's attitude toward and treatment of the elderly. The theme of adjusting to retirement after an active life is increasingly being addressed in today's society. Discussion groups might examine Ozzie Penn's reasons for buying Engine No. 9 and recreating a famous train wreck in which the engineer was killed. Discussants could also consider the motives of Ozzie's friends: why do they decide to join Ozzie on the train instead of remaining in the relative safety of their retirement home?

Braun's mysteries also reflect contemporary popular culture. In The Cat Who Blew the Whistle, America's enduring fascination with railroads is central to the plot. Like many Americans, Floyd Trevelyan is an avid collector of model trains, and by purchasing a steam locomotive and setting up excursions, he is merely expanding his collection while, at the same time, capitalizing upon the nostalgic appeal of train travel. Quill draws upon many of the same emotions when he composes a ballad to memorialize Ozzie Penn and his famous wreck.

Like the rest of The Cat Who mysteries, this novel is likely to appeal to fans of the "puzzle mystery" genre; those readers who like to match their deductive skills against those of the sleuths, and who prefer violence seen from a detached perspective, and sex that is more implicit than explicit. Cat lovers, too, enjoy Braun's mysteries, probably because she strikes a balance between believable feline behavior and the superior intelligence most cat owners suspect their animals possess.

These novels are more successful than most animal detective fiction because of Quill, a human interpreter through whom KoKo and Yum Yum's discoveries are revealed. Like the reader, Quill always suspects that the cats have led him to the solution, but he can never prove that they have done anything more than behave in typical cat fashion.

1. For nearly a hundred years, before the development of the U. S. interstate highway system and the expansion of airplane travel to the general public, most Americans traveled on railroads. What railroad systems served the various regions? What kind of accommodations were provided for the physical comfort of these travelers?

What kinds of locomotives and cars were used? How frequently did these trains run, and how extensive were the rail systems?

2. Engineers and train wrecks are a large part of American myth and legend. Who are some of these engineers, and what were the circumstances which made them famous? What do these stories reveal about the way historical events and characters are translated into legend and myth?

3. In the past, excursions by train were usually tied to a specific event such as a sports contest or a convention of some social, political, professional, or religious group. How were these excursions organized? What kinds of activities took place? What groups of people took part in these excursions?

4. Because of Americans' nostalgia for the days of travel by rail, nowadays there are many train excursions, usually to various places of scenic or historical interest. Why are these excursions popular, even among people who are not railroad buffs? Does this popularity suggest that railroad travel can still have a promising role in the future of U.S. transportation? Why or why not? What could have to be done to make railroad passenger travel practical?

5. Near the end of the novel, Polly Duncan suffers a heart attack which Qwill blames upon the stress of planning and building her new house.

What symptoms does Braun describe so that her readers have already begun to suspect the nature of Polly's problem?

In what ways is Polly's behavior typical of heart attack patients?

6. KoKo and Yum Yum seem to know about the deaths of Ducker and the Trevelyans, even before these deaths occur. Moreover, as in earlier novels, the Siamese prove to be unmatched judges of character. What are some of the American folk traditions about animals' ESP? How does Braun use these ideas in working out the solution of her mysteries?

7. Various animals and birds appear throughout The Cat Who novels. In The Cat Who Blew the Whistle, for example, readers are introduced to Marconi the owl and Celia Robinson's black and white cat, Wrigley. Polly's Siamese, Bootsie, also figures in the plot. What functions do these animals serve in structure and overall technique of the novel?

8. Usually, Braun's sympathetic characters re-appear in subsequent novels, while unsympathetic characters are likely to be killed or incarcerated.

Do the sympathetic characters seem more complex and believable than those with evil schemes? Are characters treated consistently from novel to novel?

9. In her mythical Moose County, Braun has created a stable, close-knit community, traditionally isolated from urban population centers, at least during most of the winter. How do these novels differ in tone from those set in the city? What devices does Braun use to achieve the same effect in the city novels? How does Qwill's personality change as he adjusts to life in Moose County? Is this development similar to the changes that have occurred as the cats have become his family?

10. The Cat Who novels are among the most popular mysteries today, having inspired a multitude of less successful imitators. Why are these novels consistently on the best seller list? Why do readers buy, read, and collect these books?

11. The Cat Who Blew the Whistle recounts family conflicts spanning three generations. What are the roots of these conflicts, and how do they directly influence the plot of the novel?

12. Florrie Penn's usual wedding alienated her from her family. Would this wedding seem less unusual today?

Why did Ozzie Penn object so strenuously to the wedding and to the marriage? How did this estrangement affect all the people directly, and even indirectly, involved in the dispute?

13. Floyd Trevelyan operates the Lumbertown Credit Union in Sawdust City, and initially he appears to have been guilty of financial mismanagement akin to that alleged in some of the recent savings and loan scandals.

With the bankruptcy of Lockmaster Indemnity Corporation, all the depositors lose their money. How does Brain use this financial mismanagement to emphasize Floyd's mismanagement of his home and family?

14. When Ozzie Penn buys Engine No. 9, he appears to be rescuing his daughter and granddaughter from financial ruin. What are his actual reasons for buying this locomotive?

Why does he deliberately wreck No. 9?

Why do the other residents of the Railroad Retirement Center choose to accompany him?

15. How does KoKo communicate clues to Qwilleran? Are these actions believable feline behavior? What elements does Braun add to the novel by having Qwill untangle the mystery in this way?

16. Several of the supporting characters appear in more than one Cat Who novel. How does each of these characters change from book to book? How does Qwill change?

17. Nella Harper manipulates the entire Trevelyan family, playing upon the weaknesses of each. What are the weaknesses she exploits? How does she take advantage of these weaknesses?

18. Without Celia Robinson's information, Qwill might not have been able to solve the case. Certainly he would have reached the correct conclusion much more slowly. Nevertheless, he is wary of allowing anyone to know the information's source. Are his methods completely ethical?

19. Inheriting the Klingenschoen fortune has changed Qwilleran's life. In what ways might the plot have been different if he were not the Klingenschoen heir? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Qwill's wealth?

20. Why is the Qwill Pen column the most popular column in the Moose County Something? What similar columns appear in daily newspapers?

Why is Qwill a successful interviewer, even when he uses a tape recorder?

Literary Precedents

Like its predecessors, The Cat Who Blew the Whistle undoubtedly owes much to the stories of heroic, resourceful animals like Flipper and Lassie, but its primary antecedents are the "puzzle" mystery tradition. The relationship between Qwill and KoKo continues to resemble that of Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, and the addition of Celia Robinson as Qwill's agent suggests a parallel to Sol Panzer in the Rex Stout novels.

Related Titles

The success of The Cat Who series has led to many other novels which combine animals and sleuthing. Two series ostensibly written by cats are the Midnight Louie series Catnap and Pussyfoot written by Carole Nelson Douglas, as well as Wish You Were Here and Rest in Pieces written by Sneaky Pie Brown (with the assistance of Rita Mae Brown), in which Mary Minor Hairsteen receives credit for unravelling cases actually solved by Mrs. Murphy (a gray tiger cat) and Tee Tucker (a Welsh Corgi). Cats also figure in Lydia Adamson's series involving cat sitter, Alice Nestleton. Dogs are represented in Susan Conant's mysteries solved by Holly Winter with the help of her malamutes, Rowdy and Kimi — also in Melissa Cleary's account of the adventures of college instructor Jackie Walsh and her German shepherd Jake. In the adventures of Kate Morgan's sleuth, Dewey James, horses are the primary focus.

A seemingly endless number of mysteries and mystery series now focus upon small town life. Three of the most obvious are Mary Daheim's Alpine series, Taylor McCafferty's Haskell Blevins series, and Charlotte MacLeod's Peter Shandy series (set at Balaclava Agricultural College), her Dittany Monk series (set in Lobelia Falls), and her Madoc Rhys series (set in New Brunswick).

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