Come to Grief Short Guide

Come to Grief by Dick Francis

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Admirable Sid Halley is the moral centerpiece of the novel. However, he is physically flawed in a way that shapes his personality and determines his attitude toward people. The last of his jockey-related injuries—a severely damaged left hand—abruptly ended his career. In Odds Against, soon after Halley embarked upon a second career as a sometime investigator, two of Francis's most vicious villains chop off Halley's crippled hand at the wrist. The novel ends with the hope that modern technology will enable him to be fitted with a myoelectric hand, so he can be whole again, perhaps even mounting a horse and winning a race.

Unlike most whodunit writers, Francis has pretty much eschewed the series detective, preferring to create a different hero for each book. In 1979, however, he reintroduced Sid Halley, probably because of a popular British television series featuring him. In that book, Whip Hand, Halley is becoming accustomed to his newly acquired prosthetic hand; but self-sufficient though he again is, he remains concerned that serious damage to his one good hand will definitively incapacitate him. This vulnerability is a recurrent source of emotional turmoil, but he persists in taking physical risks, courting potential disaster when inquiries demand that he do so. Such selfless courage defines not only Halley, but is a leitmotif, or a dominant recurring theme, both in Whip Hand and Come to Grief. Thus, Francis shows how a society cannot function if it allows itself to be overtaken by fear.

Halley's mutilation also can be seen as emblematic of the hero as a flawed man, for despite his positive qualities and abilities, he is unable to maintain a sustained relationship with a woman. The overt reason, at least in the past, was his all-consuming devotion to his racing career, but in the post-jockey years, Halley becomes similarly consumed by the investigation of the nonce. And having lived a physically taxing and threatening life for so long, he cannot settle into a domestic normal routine. In other words, despite his strong social conscience and deeply empathetic nature, he is a loner, living among people but maintaining an emotional distance from most. A noteworthy exception is his relationship with ailing Rachel Ferns. His frequent visits, ability to communicate sensitively with her, and deep concern about her fate ("Oh God, Rachel, I thought, I would dream your nightmares for you if I could") add an important dimension to his character. Interestingly, his closest enduring relationship is with his ex-father-in-law, to whose home he retreats at times of crisis.

Halley's ex-wife, Jenny, remarks in Whip Hand: "I want an ordinary man." Sid does not meet that need. His physical resilience may reflect the fact that he has never forgotten his illegitimate birth and poverty-stricken childhood. It also may be why he constantly needs to prove himself and rejects sympathy and permanent relationships as he seeks security and success on his own terms.

Ellis Quint, Halley's friend turned nemesis and the other major character in Come to Grief, was raised by "inoffensively rich," genuinely loving parents who doted upon their "famous, good-looking, successful" only child. Following his championship stint as an

amateur jump jockey, Quint became a ubiquitous television personality on sports quiz programs and talk shows. Manufacturers craved his endorsement of their products, and youngsters dressed like him. Quint was, Halley reflects, "a brilliant, laughing, able, funny performer ... that regularly raised the nation's happiness level." He was especially effective in special interview segments with children, including one dealing with the horse mutilation epidemic. His empathetic, exuberant camera personality was a facade, however, for he was an admitted cynic who was concerned primarily about his ratings and was bored by his postracing celebrity life. "Danger is addictive," he tells Halley, and "fame's no substitute for danger." Tired of being a "goodygoody," he "wanted the dark side," which included smashing, exploding, and mutilating. Having mutilated one pony to make a good story that would improve his ratings, he became addicted: "The scrunch of bones is a million-volt orgasm."

Continued television success was not Quint's only motivation. Once Halley came on the scene as investigator, Quint became determined to destroy him. Their close friendship notwithstanding, Quint always envied Halley, the rival who always beat him "in the last stride," who "was champion jockey for five or six years .. . Cunning.

Nerveless." In his pre-suicide letter, Quint reveals to Halley: "I wanted to corrupt you, too. No one should be unbendable ... I wanted to prove that no one was good. I wanted you to crumble. To be like me." Quint, however, is no killer. When businessman Owen Yorkshire is ready to murder Halley in order to protect his investment in a Quint-centered advertising campaign, Quint demurs, just as he stops his father from doing so. His urge to commit evil went only as far as animals. Although his lengthy confessional to Halley— in person and via letter—is self-serving, it reveals a complex, tormented soul whose "sour, cruel underside" recedes with his death, as Halley puts it.

Social Concerns

In almost forty crime novels since Dead Cert in 1962, Dick Francis has focused upon people whose lives are transformed by occurrences that surprise them and are beyond their control. Whereas this pattern is commonplace of the genre, Francis departs from the norm. His detective is not an outsider dealing with a case that has happened to come his way, but rather he is a member of the group into which criminality has intruded. Nero Wolfe, Lew Archer, Charles Paris, Inspector Maigret, and Adam Dalgliesh may never again meet the principals in their cases; most Francis detectives, on the other hand, continue to live with their erstwhile clients, regularly seeing them at the Jockey Club and elsewhere.

Therefore, solving cases enables the detectives as well as their peers to resume normal lives.

Normality in a Francis novel means in large measure adherence to the code of the racing fraternity as embodied in the Jockey Club's rules and its standards of honor and mutual respect for dealing with people and horses. Violations that impact upon the latter invariably reverberate upon the former, so intertwined are they in Francis's universe. He also regards the code as a model for the entire community to embrace because to him the racing world is a microcosm of the larger society. In Come to Grief, Sid Halley, a former steeplechase jockey, investigates a wave of seemingly wanton horse mutilations, which are undermining the security and trust that are the bedrock of the sport. When his investigation points to the culpability of a close friend, Ellis Quint, who is a popular television personality and former champion amateur jump jockey, Halley is torn between conflicting claims of friendship and evidence. At the start of the novel, Halley (the narrator) says: "I had this friend that everyone loved, and I put him on trial." An all too frequent consequence of his detective work, he laments, is that investigations sometimes unearthed information that "smashed peaceful lives forever."

Because Halley cannot tolerate duplicity and other egregious violations of the social code by which he lives, he follows where his clues lead him. For example, at the end of the novel, Quint writes Halley a lengthy confession that concludes with "You win, Sid." The winner, however, has mixed feelings of "regret, loss, acceptance and relief."

Although Halley is incorruptible, unyielding, and a paragon of virtue, he is sensitive and humane. These traits distinguish him from most of the characters, who are self-serving and parochial in outlook and action. Quint's family, for instance, cannot cope with their son's fall from grace: his mother commits suicide, and his father—an archetypal country squire—attempts to kill Halley. In stark contrast to the dysfunctional Quint family, Linda and Rachel Ferns, mother and daughter, confront their traumas with dignity. Linda is in a children's hospital cancer ward, suffering from terminal leukemia, but faces the mysterious mutilation of her pony with mature stoicism. Both she and her mother, who asked Halley to look into the crime, are mutually supportive of each other and seem to be the one sound family in the book, although Linda and her husband divorced five years earlier.

Indeed, Francis's focus upon various families in the book demonstrates his belief in the importance of this social unit and that the incipient breakdown of a family augers ill for the continued well-being of the greater community. To Francis, whose heroes are his alter egos, responsibility to self (knowing thyself, in ancient Greek parlance) leads to successful family relations, which redound to the benefit of society as a whole.

Ironically, Halley and the detective-heroes in other Francis novels either are divorced or unable to maintain lasting romantic relationships.

Troublesome to Halley throughout the novel—and threatening not only to his reputation but also to his physical well-being— is the negative public reaction to him and his accusations. People refuse to accept unsavory truths about Quint, a man they lionize and adore, partly because he makes them happy. They steadfastly believe him to be innocent of any wrongdoing. Halley, therefore, is subjected to continuing abuse, especially from the tabloid press. For example, India Cathcart, a leading gossip columnist, calls him a smug, pathetic has-been and a man with an ego problem. His boundless ambition brought about the premature end of his career, and now he is determined to destroy Quint's career. Although newsman Kevin Mills of The Pump is sympathetic to Halley, he and the detective are limited by British law, under which no evidence can be made public between the time a person is charged and brought to trial.

Thus, uninformed public opinion flourishes unchecked.

On the whole, social turmoil is a dominant concern in Come to Grief, which the Mystery Writers of America awarded an Edgar as the best novel of 1996. Dysfunctional relationships and families and a partiality by the media are pervasive. Another important element in the social fabric Francis weaves is the public's gullibility, or more specifically, its uncritical embracing of a media star and a propensity to be dazzled by mere personality. Because these matters add substance to the narrative, Come to Grief is more than a stereotypical genre novel.

In addition to resolving a whodunit problem, Francis also develops a credible social commentary.

Techniques

The first-person narrative technique creates a sense of immediacy as well as complete reader involvement because Sid Halley is so admirable. And since Halley also is the narrator-hero of Odds Against and Whip Hand, regular Francis readers bring to Come to Grief their past familiarity with him and a positive attitude toward this likable and trustworthy fellow. The physical dangers he experiences three times in the novel have greater impact because Halley describes them as he undergoes the torment than if Francis utilized an omniscient or third-person narrator.

Unlike most works in the genre, Come to Grief does not keep the reader in suspense about the villain, for the novel begins with Halley fretting about his role in having brought an old friend to trial. The narrative, in other words, is retrospective, but Francis creates compelling suspense through Halley's pursuit of his prey while the detective himself is being pursued. In fact, the novel has several dramatic chases that advance the plot and heighten the tension.

A standard element in crime fiction is the influence of the past upon the present. This motif looms large in Come to Grief, not only as a means of providing a backdrop for the main action, but also to develop the social milieu as an influential factor in character development, verisimilitude, and motivation. Although the cast of characters is large, most have emerged from the same back ground and remain part of an essentially insular societal unit.

Themes

Plot is the most important element in detective fiction, for the author's primary aim is to unravel the mystery that temporarily has disrupted a society's normal routine. Character is next in degree of importance. Although in most crime fiction, fully developed and individualized characters are rare; rather, certain recurring types usually comprise the cast. Thematic content normally is minimal in the genre, except for certain obvious themes propelled by the subject matter: the perennial conflict between good and evil; a facade of civilized morality concealing evil; and acquisitiveness or jealousy as a motivating force. These familiar motifs are present to a greater or lesser degree in Come to Grief and other Francis novels, with his creative variations upon them, but his stories are more theme driven than is typical of the genre.

By having as his detective and narrator as complex a figure as Halley, Francis sets up an implicit contrast between him and most of the other characters, who are ordinary, rather shallow, people. A society, the author implies, is comprised mainly of the latter, who seek (albeit temporarily) an extraordinary person in their occasions. But if such a person becomes a bearer of bad myths and exposing pillars of the community as fakes or worse, the hoi polloi become troubled and insecure, and then instinctively attack the messenger. In Come to Grief, when the Jockey Club crowd's security and smug complacency are shattered by inexplicable attacks on the horses, they cannot cope. When Halley's solution suggests that the perpetrator is within their midst, one of their own, they become even more addled.

In the novel, then, Francis exposes fundamental and pervasive human flaws. Aside from gullibility, there is indifference that allows corruption to thrive and desire for pleasure that overwhelms the wisdom of asserting a sensible skepticism. Further, the people's misguided and uninformed attitudes, as well as their physically violent responses, are aided and abetted by an irresponsible press. Halley laments: "No one seemed to blame the tabloid columnist who'd written, "The once-revered Sid Halley, green with envy, tries to tear down a talent he hasn't a prayer of matching....'" Among the papers, "The Pump had stirred up the most disgust," he says, and Kevin Mills, its chief "bleeding heart reporter," had "practically burned holes in the page with the heat of his prose." This attitude toward him notwithstanding, Halley meets with Mills and strikes a cash deal with him for each to feed the other information about the horse mutilations, for when investigating a case, Halley above all is pragmatic.

Related to his themes concerning the irresponsible press and the public's susceptibility to celebrities is Francis's focus upon television as a dangerously powerful medium that creates false heroes for mass consumption. Quint is a sterling example of this practice. Here is a person with small talent who through skillful public relations gimmickry is transformed into a star and hero for the masses. Because of their friendship, Halley at first tries to deny Quint's culpability, despite the incremental build up of incriminating evidence. "Let the compulsion be some other poor bastard's ravening subconscious," he thinks, and he hopes that "Ellis would be able to control such a vicious appetite, even

if he felt it." Halley's attitude toward Quint parallels his reactions to others and reflects a belief in the essential goodness of people.

This theme also is manifest in Halley's dealings with Jonathan, wayward nephew of the horse set Brackens, one of whose colts loses a foot to the mysterious marauder.

Not quite sixteen, Jonathan has been expelled from school, is on probation for car theft, and lives with his aunt because his stepfather cannot stand him. But Mrs. Bracken confesses, "It's not working out, though.

I can't get through to him." Jonathan resembles Chico Barnes, a disadvantaged youngster and potential delinquent in Odds Against (1965), who becomes a friend and erstwhile assistant to Halley and even saves his life on one occasion. Although Jonathan has grown up in affluence, he has been denied love. Like Chico, he has a potentially bad future. Because of Sid's attention, however, Jonathan changes. Happening upon important evidence in the colt maiming case, he becomes an important helpmate to Halley, who manages to get through to this teenager despite his "loose lip and an attitude problem," as Halley puts it. Given a meaningful role to play and accepted by someone despite his "contrary rebelliousness," Jonathan proves to be something other than the delinquent his Establishment family believes him to be. "He's bright and he's bored," according to Halley, whose trust in Jonathan—as a replacement for Chico—reaps dividends.

Jonathan and Quint come from the same background, and for different reasons they go astray. The former is rehabilitated, whereas the latter is beyond redemption. By means of the two, Francis provides another dimension to his theme of how myopic class prejudice not only distorts people's attitudes but also can become self-destructive.

Key Questions

Dick Francis is often described as a crime novelist writing beyond the conventions of standard crime fiction. What elements of Come to Grief are standards of the genre?

What elements are unusual for the genre?

How do these non-standard elements add depth to the novel and its characters?

1. Because horse racing recurs to a greater or lesser degree in all Francis novels, consider the thematic and symbolic functions of this motif in Come to Grief.

Also, to what extent does the author present the Jockey Club milieu as a microcosm, a world in miniature, or as a very different and singular society?

2. Sid Halley appears as the detectivenarrator in Odds Against (1965) and Whip Hand (1979). Is he basically the same person in all three, or has his character evolved?

3. Francis has been criticized for his inability to create believable women. How credible are the female characters in the novel?

4. How necessary is the violence that the elder Quint and Owen Yorkshire perpetrate against Halley? Does it simply make for a livelier narrative, or is it organically appropriate?

5. Is Ellis Quint a psychologically credible person? Are the motivations for his actions believable?

6. Does Francis provide an adequate basis for Halley's tormented equivocal attitude toward Quint?

7. The Francis hero normally has a cross to bear. Aside from Sid Halley's bionic arm, is this motif present in Come to Grief?

8. In the course of the novel, Francis depicts various relationships between parents and children. How important to the plot is this recurring motif?

9. Francis's painstaking research into arcane subjects provides substance and credibility to many of his novels. Is there evidence of such research in Come to Grief?

Literary Precedents

Dick Francis novels typically have more action than is the norm in most crime fiction, so they can be categorized as adventure stories as well as whodunits. As such, Come to Grief and its predecessors in the Francis canon are related to Ian Fleming's "James Bond" novels, with which Francis has acknowledged a familiarity. Further, because of the fast pace of the action, violence, and presence of quintessential tough guys in almost every book, Francis's work descends indirectly from the American hardboiled tradition of crime fiction and its major innovative practitioners Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Ross Macdonald, an American in the Chandler-Hammett tradition, who wrote complex novels centered on psychological problems and family conflicts, also may be an influence on early Francis. John Welcome's espionage novels, which include horse racing, narrator-heroes, multiple venues, and complex chases, echo in Francis's novels. Welcome, in fact, is both a friend and sometime collaborator.

Related Titles

The most obvious related titles are Odds Against and Whip Hand, the two previous Sid Halley novels. Since horse racing elements are omnipresent in Francis's works, all of his titles are related in terms of their framework subject matter. Further, each of his narrator-heroes, whatever his name, family background, or nominal profession, is an admirable person with whom the reader immediately becomes empathetic.

These similarities of subject matter and hero do not result in a series of novels that simply are variations on the same theme.

Rather, Francis creates singular situations, plot surprises, and individually realized characters for each of his books.

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