

The Case of the Grinning Gorilla Short Guide

The Case of the Grinning Gorilla by Erle Stanley Gardner

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Characters

Perry Mason is one of the most appealing characters in all of mystery fiction. He is a tall, lean man with the physical skill to be formidable in a fight. He is also clever; he thinks well on his feet and is hard to throw off balance, even when the prosecution surprises him in the courtroom. In addition, he is a superb researcher who is always up-to-date on the latest forensic discoveries and who has so thoroughly researched legal precedents that he is usually several steps ahead of his opponents. In many ways, Mason is an idealized version of Gardner himself, who was a professional boxer in his youth and who was an extraordinary researcher. In the novels, there is no mistaking Mason for anything but the champion of justice, the protector of the innocent, and the implacable enemy of evil.

The Case of the Grinning Gorilla turns in large measure on the discovery of which characters are the good guys and which are the bad guys. Once revealed, the villains are shown to be thoroughly despicable. Gardner rarely goes in for subtle shadings of character. In this novel, Mrs. Kempton is foolish, but her efforts to lie to protect herself are so inept that she seems little more than a routine victim in need of Mason's skill and moral support.

Some readers of Perry Mason mysteries have been disturbed by the easy excusing of lying by frightened defendants and by Mason's frequent skirting of the law. In The Case of the Grinning Gorilla, he routinely ignores stop signs and speeds through traffic. He seeks to confuse the police by escorting his client away from the scene of the murder, as if he and she were but casual observers of the uproar. For Mason, the interests of his client come before the requirements of law enforcers. Part of his appeal may rest in his commitment to his clients in the face of bewildering legalities.



Social Concerns

Gardner was concerned about poor people getting a fair shake from the law, viewing himself as an advocate for underdogs. As a lawyer, he often defended Chinese-Americans and Mexican-Americans who were too poor to pay him. His Perry Mason novels reflect his advocacy of the rights of the weak and of the impoverished. In *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla*, Mason defends Mrs. Josephine Kempton, a housekeeper who has been slandered by her former employer, the millionaire Benjamin Addicks. Later, having been accused of the murder of Addicks, she is shown to be a victim of rich and powerful people. As is the case with most of Mason's clients, she needs a lawyer who will give her the full protection of the law.

Techniques

Gardner was proud that he wrote to entertain the broad mass of readers.

His techniques reflect his effort to please the ordinary reader. *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla* features a clear narrative. There are no literary tricks such as flashbacks or the omission of details to be revealed as surprises later.

All clues are presented up front, without any vagueness. The injured Benjamin Addicks's clean-shaven face is clearly described; so is the grinning gorilla; so is the relationship between Addicks and his brother in Australia.

When Mason discovers something, so does the reader. This creates the sensation of being a partner in Mason's investigations, and it does not strain one's mind. The mystery is fun and not taxing.

Although critics nearly always denigrate Gardner's writing, noting that it is awkward and filled with trite descriptions, Gardner excels at one important element of fiction: he writes realistic dialogue. Conversation between characters in fiction often can be stilted because of the need to tell readers what the characters know and think, yet *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla* has dialogue that sounds like the conversation of real people, even though the novel is told largely through the conversations between characters. Gardner's talent for writing good dialogue is not enough by itself to make him a great writer, but many a great writer has not written such believable conversation. In the instance of *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla*, telling the story largely in dialogue creates the sensation of being present as the characters work through the mystery. The narrative also seems fast paced because much information is related by the characters rather than explained by the author.



Themes

Gardner's fiction is not thematically sophisticated, because he strove to write novels that would be enjoyable and quick reading. Part of the appeal of the Perry Mason novels is the theme of the underdog overcoming adversity.

Another significant theme is that of the law as something that often works against unsophisticated people. The agents of the law, such as police lieutenant Tragg and district attorney Hamilton Burger, are usually more interested in convictions than in untangling the complicated legal webs that have ensnared the innocent. The hostility between the district attorney and police on one side and Perry Mason and the private detective Paul Drake on the other is a common theme in the Perry Mason mysteries.

Another theme that recurs in Gardner's novels is that of altered states of consciousness. Gardner seems interested in the legal ramifications of crimes committed by people who are not in control of themselves. In *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla*, hypnotism is used to confuse the plot; gorillas as well as people may have committed murder while hypnotized. Therefore, someone far away when the crime was committed may be responsible for hypnotically planting the murder in the mind of its perpetrator. Furthermore, the devious murder plot was made possible by Benjamin Addicks's obsession with proving that people who would not ordinarily do so may commit murder if their minds were sufficiently conditioned by hypnotism.

Gardner does not carry this theme to a logical conclusion, leaving uncertain its implications for determining guilt or innocence, but he does use it well for complicating the novel's mystery by widening the number of suspects who could have been involved in the murder of Addicks beyond those who were on the scene when the crime occurred.



Adaptations

In the 1930s, six Perry Mason novels were made into motion pictures for Warner Brothers. *The Case of the Howling Dog* (1934) was released the same year the book was published and starred Warren William as Mason and Helen Trenholme as his secretary Delia Street. It was directed by Alan Crosland. William plays Mason as a stylish courtroom genius. *The Case of the Curious Bride* (1934) was released in 1935, again with William as Mason but with Claire Dodd as Street. Michael Curtiz directed. In this picture Mason proposes marriage to Street. *The Case of the Lucky Legs* (1934) was also released in 1935, once again starring William.

Genevieve Tobin was Street, and Archie L. Mayo directed. *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (1933) was released in 1936. William played Mason, and Claire Dodd returned as Street. It was directed by William Clemens. In this film, Mason and Street are married, something they do not manage in the books. *The Case of the Caretaker's Cat* (1935) was made into the motion picture *The Case of the Black Cat* in 1936, with William McGann as director. *The Case of the Stuttering Bishop* (1936) was adapted to the silver screen in 1937 and starred Donald Woods as Mason. William Clemens directed. In these films, a sophisticated Perry Mason breaks down hostile witnesses with his brilliant courtroom tactics, but he has an uncertain private life with Delia Street.

These films were popular, but William seems to have established himself in the public imagination as Mason and the series did not survive his leaving it.

Perry Mason was a weekday serial on CBS radio, beginning in 1943. John Larkin was Mason, and Joan Alexander was Delia Street. In 1957, Perry Mason began a critically acclaimed nine-year run on CBS television. Raymond Burr won an Emmy for his portrayal of Mason. Burr was originally intended to play District Attorney Hamilton Burger, but he was given the title role when other performers turned down the part. Barbara Hale played Delia Street, William Hopper was Mason's private detective Paul Drake, William Tallman was Hamilton Burger, and Ray Collins was Lieutenant Tragg of the police. During its run, more than two hundred one-hour black and white episodes of Perry Mason were shown.

The series continues to be shown on television in syndication, and Raymond Burr has become the image of Perry Mason for many people. When the series first aired, many viewers were disappointed in the portrayals. Gardner describes Mason as slim, but Burr is husky. In *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla*, Paul Drake is described as "a tall, cadaverous, solemn-looking individual," but William Hopper is almost as husky as Burr, and he plays Drake as an outgoing and cheerful man.

The New Perry Mason returned the fictional lawyer to television in 1973.

This time the one-hour episodes were in color. Monte Markham played Mason, Sharon Acker played Street, Albert Stratton played Drake, Harry Guardino played the district



attorney, and Dane Clark played Lieutenant Tragg. This new series failed to capture the public's interest and was quickly canceled.

In 1985, Raymond Burr returned as Mason in the NBC television movie *The Return of Perry Mason*, in which Mason quits his position as an appellate court judge to defend his one-time secretary Delia Street against a murder charge.

Street was once again played by Barbara Hale. Most of the old television series' stars had died, including William Hopper, so the private detective became Paul Drake Jr., son of Mason's old friend, and was played by William Katt, Hale's son. The highest rated made-for-television movie of 1985, it featured Mason outwitting a young prosecutor who regards him as over-the-hill. In 1986, Burr, Hale, and Katt returned to NBC television with *The Case of the Notorious Nun*, a well-written production that captured the flavor of Burr's original television series. Several more Perry Mason television motion pictures were made, extending into the mid-1950s; they were very popular and featured above-average adventures and mysteries. After Burr's death in 1993, NBC tried to keep the series going by adapting teleplays to new actors who ostensibly were new characters taking up cases the deceased Perry Mason left behind. These television motion pictures appeared under the series title *The Perry Mason Mysteries*. They lacked the large, reassuring presence of Burr, who was much loved by mystery fans, but as of 1995, NBC continued to produce them.

Key Questions

The Perry Mason books are loved by a multitude of readers, and mystery fans are likely to have read at least a few of them. The principal problem they present for discussion is focusing; people are likely to talk about whatever they like best of the books, without concern for what others say. One way to focus discussion is to begin with the characterization of Mason himself. What about him makes him compelling for millions of readers who seem unable to get enough of him? Is he a stereotypical good-guy, or does he have depth; is he a well-rounded character with strengths and weaknesses that humanize him?

Another approach could be to examine the influence Perry Mason books have had on literature and society.

Lawyers often complain that the novels create a false picture of how law is actually practiced; perhaps a lawyer could join the discussion group and point out the problems the Mason novels have created for lawyers and courts. Is Mason too prone to dramatics and tricks in the courtroom? In the discussion of the influence of the books will almost inevitably appear the exceptionally popular television series that starred Raymond Burr. Expanding a discussion of this series to include the television motion pictures of the 1980s and 1990s and the old radio show of the 1940s to 1950s could lead to an insightful discussion of how Gardner's conception of Mason and the law has permeated American households for generations through broadcast adaptations, which have also spread it around the world. It seems likely that for many people American law is Gardner's law, as portrayed by Perry Mason, Hamilton Burger, and other figures. Try to avoid focusing only on the obvious negatives of such vast influence; remember, one of the ideas Gardner spread is implicit in his books and television series — that is, the law can be made to serve the poor, the innocent, and the homeless.

1. Most of the Perry Mason novels predate the Supreme Court's Miranda ruling that people who are arrested must be advised of their Constitutional rights, and other rulings such as every defendant has a right to have a lawyer represent him or her. How would the plots of Perry Mason novels have to be changed to reflect modern American legal practices? Could the police still bug lawyer-client conferences?
2. Many lawyers dislike the Perry Mason novels and the television series that starred Raymond Burr, complaining that they overemphasize courtroom dramatics. Is this true? What other aspects of the practice of law show up in the Perry Mason plots?
3. Perry Mason often represents poor people. How does he make any money?
4. Mason often has an antagonistic relationship to the police and district attorney. Why is this? Is this a healthy attitude for a lawyer to have?
5. How close does Mason come to breaking the law in *The Case of the Grinning Gorilla*? Does he ever actually break the law?



6. What are Mason's ethical values?

How do they apply to his practice of law?

7. In real life, Gardner was active in efforts to protect the rights of the accused. He devoted much time and money to trying to free those he thought were unjustly convicted, as well as to efforts to strengthen legal protections for citizens against excesses of legal authorities. How are these activities reflected in his Perry Mason stories?

8. An interesting phenomenon of television mysteries of the 1980s and 1990s has been the occasional lifting of a teleplay for the Raymond Burr Perry Mason series by mystery programs such as *Murder She Wrote*, often without bothering to rewrite the story enough that it makes sense in its new context.

Devotees of television mystery programs may have noted many of these and could mention them in a discussion. What does such lifting of old Perry Mason plots suggest about the durability of Gardner's creation? What does it suggest about modern television mystery shows?

9. How does the courtroom aspect of the Perry Mason television series compare with other courtroom programs, and with the real life court proceedings of the O. J. Simpson trial?

Literary Precedents

Sherlock Holmes is the best known of altruistic investigators of crimes. He was conceived by Arthur Conan Doyle in the 1880s and set the precedent for many individualistic detectives in later writings. By the time Gardner created Perry Mason, writers had expanded the background of the detective from that of a private consultant or policeman to include characters from many careers and social levels, such as G. K. Chesterton's priest Father Brown and Dorothy L. Sayers's socialite Lord Peter Wimsey. Most of these characters work their way through complicated puzzles that form the heart of their mysteries, but Perry Mason mysteries are seldom so complicated. The Case of the Grinning Gorilla is a thriller that depends on suspenseful situations, such as when Mason is trapped in a bedroom with a huge gorilla who has been maddened by cruel experiments on its mind. Fast action carries the novel's plot, rather than elaborately laid out and puzzling clues.

In his down-to-earth behavior, and in his involvement in mysteries that feature ordinary people, Mason has much in common with Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer and other American detectives concerned with making livings in the hard-knocks world of everyday life. The Case of the Grinning Gorilla is a bit more exotic than most Perry Mason mysteries because of the maddened gorillas, but it features Gardner's dedication to realistic portrayals of the law and to the portrayals of ordinary people in trouble.

Related Titles

The first Perry Mason novel was *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (1933), which was closely followed by *The Case of the Sulky Girl* (1933) and several other popular books. There are 86 books in the Perry Mason series, which may make it the most successful series about one character ever published.

The books share a clear focus on the protagonist Perry Mason, an insistence on realism, and fast-moving narratives.



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