

Death Claims and Nightwork Short Guide

Death Claims and Nightwork by Joseph Hansen

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Characters

Hansen's techniques of characterization are like those of Ross Macdonald: he creates a patterned repetition of action based upon the psychological needs and dependencies of characters and through an unexpected simile pulls characterization and plot together in physical description. In a series of short chapters, each character is introduced, placed within a very specifically detailed landscape or domestic environment and then, as the novel progresses, brought into interaction with the other characters and places Hansen makes the physical environment both actual and symbolic. For example in *Death Claims*, "area blanca" is the physical setting and spreads its "bleakness" into all who live or visit there. Characterization is one of the strongest elements in the early Brandstetter series, providing a connection between characters, landscape, and the social vision of the novelist.

In later novels in the series, Hansen achieves an almost Dickensian exuberance in his attempts to expand his social vision through characterization.

In *Nightwork*, Dewitt Gifford, an aging homosexual who entombs himself in the family house overlooking the dried up creek, is a symbol of a decaying paternalist ideology. He demands and buys "protection" from the very gangs which his family have helped create by their exploitive development of the slum, Gifford Gardens. Like Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), Gifford is a manipulative voyeur: protecting while exploiting his domination of people and property.

Other characters in the book are not as carefully drawn and thus become only shadowy embodiments of social or economic institutions or attitudes.



Social Concerns/Themes

These two books (the second and seventh) in the Brandstetter series are excellent examples of the way Hansen combines characterization and social commentary in the mystery novel. Both novels focus on a group of characters whose patterns of dependency on sex, money, drugs, or religion are disrupted by the death of a single individual. In *Death Claims*, Hansen's detective, Brandstetter, is investigating the drowning death of John Oats. Oats, a rare book dealer, turns out to have a hold over a group of characters who are suspects in his death. As Brandstetter tears away at the layers of illusion surrounding Oats and his death, the book dealer is found to deal in drugs; a habit he sustains through various forms of emotional and financial blackmail. In *Nightwork*, the death of a truck driver, Paul Meyer, whose rig has plunged in flames off a mountain, leads Brandstetter into the world of independent truckers who haul and dump toxic waste. The mystery moves from the slums of Los Angeles, where the truckers live, to the corporate offices of the companies who seek to cover up the dumping and the dump sites.

While *Death Claims* does not seem to focus on the larger social issues which are central to later books in the series, all the elements of the Hansen mystery novel can be seen in this early work.

The book includes a series of characters whose lives interrelate with one another and whose patterns of personal dependency are disturbed by the death of a central character. These personal dependencies are symbols of larger social dependencies such as economics, the ruthless pursuit of personal reputation, religion, or sexuality. Hansen's social concerns are centered upon the relationship of public and private life and those forms of "make believe" which condition a person's relationship with others and with social and economic institutions. Also Hansen has been able to connect the thematic elements of his mystery stories with the private life of his detective. For example in *Death Claims*, the detective's personal relationship with his current lover is blocked by echoes of the same sorts of dependency upon the dead which are central to the way death claims each character in the book: April Stannard claims and is claimed by the dead John Oats; Peter Oats by his dead father; Dwight Ingallas by his dead wife and reputation; Charles Norwood by his hope that his love for John Oats might "waken" the dead; Brandstetter by his dead lover, Rod; and Doug, Dave's new lover, by the memory of a dead "French boy."

In *Nightwork*, Hansen's social vision of American society is bleak. It connects the need for money (i.e., "nightwork") and the poison it spreads into all areas of personal, family, and civic life. While Brandstetter solves the mystery, the issues raised by his investigation — the dumping of toxic waste and the responsibility of corporations — are not resolved. This novel moves away from the concept of the individual hero, so often associated with the American detective hero, and toward an ethic of collective responsibility and action. This ethic is apparent near the end of the novel in a conversation between Brandstetter and a policeman working on the case: "The air is poisoned, ponds, rivers, lakes, whole oceans. The water under the land. The land itself.



Farms, the animals on the farms. People. Whole towns have to be abandoned.
Somebody has to stop it.

Did you see that picket line out at the Foothill Springs dump? It will be them that stop it.
Dave. Not you. Not the grand jury."



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Hansen is, all the reviewers are quick to point out, squarely within the "tradition of Hammett, Chandler, and Ross Macdonald" — the hard-boiled school of detective fiction. Certain thematic elements in the Brandstetter series can be associated with the hard-boiled genre: guilt and innocence are relative terms and there is often only a thin line between them, if any; corruption occurs in both high and low places; the detective uncovers a layer of dirt beneath the surface glitter; there is no "clean" way to make a lot of money; and the detective's task is to put together the pieces of other people's lives by finding the thin thread that connects their different "stories."

Hansen's writing style also shows the influence of the hard-boiled genre with its cool, analytical detachment and the emphasis on characterization and social commentary.

While homosexuals and homosexuality are not new to the mystery novel — George Baxt wrote a series beginning with *A Queer Kind of Death* in 1966 — Hansen is one of the first writers to create a sympathetic and fully developed homosexual detective. Throughout all the books in the series, David Brandstetter is consistently mixing up the public and the private: His own homosexual relationships are inextricably bound up with the development of each case. The reader watches the detective's personal fortunes improve: Brandstetter now drives a Jaguar, lives in a fashionably remodeled stable "up a canyon" outside Los Angeles, and has inherited wealth upon his father's death. This is done to keep the reader interested in Brandstetter's developing character and to set up a contrast between the detective's wealth and his growing compassion for his impoverished clients.



Related Titles

Death Claims and Nightwork are part of the David Brandstetter series that also includes Fadeout (1970), Troublemaker (1975), The Man Everybody Was Afraid Of (1978), Skinlick (1979), Gravedigger (1982); Nightwork (1984); The Little Dog Laughed (1986); Early Graves (1987); Obedience (1988); The Boy Who Was Buried This Morning (1990), and A Country of Old Men (1991).



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