

Death Shall Overcome Short Guide

Death Shall Overcome by Emma Lathen

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Characters

There are many things a reader forgets about a detective novel, but he always remembers the detective. Banker John Putnam Thatcher is less memorable than Hercule Poirot with his eccentricities, than Lord Peter Wimsey with his aristocratic *savoir faire*, or Adam Dalgliesh with his poeticizing and policing. Thatcher is an unlikely prospect for an amateur sleuth; in fact, he shades toward the bland and unassuming. He has no colorful hobbies, like Wimsey's collection of incunabula.

Like Dalgliesh, he has a family: a deceased wife, a daughter, and grandchildren. But they figure less prominently in the Lathen series than do Dalgliesh's domestic affairs in the P. D. James novels. Thatcher also has no distinctive accent or distinguishing facial hair like Poirot.

Thatcher is a clear-thinking, persistent, imaginative executive who uses both ratiocination and common sense to solve crimes. In *Death Shall Overcome*, he shows steadfastness and determination by holding his own both against other strong Wall Street personalities and against the confusion arising from murder and marches in Manhattan. Lathen plays Thatcher off against his superior, Bradford Withers, against his immediate subordinates, and against other brokers.

Although the Sloan Guaranty is nominally directed by Bradford Withers, its president, Thatcher is clearly in charge. He is the one who can handle sensitive racial matters tactfully; Withers would unknowingly inflame them.

Thatcher is consulted by other senior officers of the firm. While they make mistakes and come to wrong conclusions — both in finance and detection — Thatcher does not. Thatcher's interplay with the elderly, powerful, and iconoclastic broker Nat Schuyler illustrates his staying power. While attempting to shake up the Street by making a black millionaire a partner in his firm and obtaining an Exchange seat for him, Schuyler keeps all the other characters except Thatcher unsettled and insecure.

The Sloan subordinates in this novel are established characters in the series.

Each is sufficiently differentiated to be a distinct personality, but none impinges so strongly on the plot as to distract from the puzzle Lathen invites the reader to solve. Billings, the elevator operator, appears at the opening of each novel to greet Thatcher as he enters the building and then is heard from no more. George C. Lancer, Chairman of the Board, telephones with regularity to interrupt Thatcher's attention to the daily operation of the Sloan or to dispatch him on some international junket with economic/diplomatic overtones. Everett Gabler and Charlie Trinkam are often seen in Thatcher's office, imploring him to take action before Withers embarrasses the Sloan. Trinkam is described as something of a hedonist and a fine trust officer, even if his methods are somewhat unorthodox. Walter Bowman, another regular, is Chief of the Research Section. Ken Nicolls, a junior executive, is the young kid on the block. But the most distinctly drawn and fully developed supporting character is Miss Rose Corsa,



Thatcher's personal secretary of long standing. Miss Corsa, raised in strict piety by Italian Catholic parents with whom she still lives, epitomizes beauty, efficiency and responsibility.

Like many secretaries, she makes decisions and attends to details for which Thatcher draws the salary.

Characterization in detective fiction requires not only a detective and innocent bystanders, but also a murderer and a victim. In *Death Shall Overcome* both have close ties with Wall Street.

Art Foote, a broker with the firm of Schuyler and Schuyler, dies of a dose of nicotine poison imbibed in a drink.

He is not very fully developed; in fact, the reader knows him for only one chapter before his demise. Thus, his death does not arouse sufficient sympathy to hinder the reader's concentration on clues. Edward Parry, the black Exchange seat nominee, is also victimized by being shot at and by being physically threatened by an irate racist.

These incidents — crucial to the plot of the novel — do arouse sympathy for Parry as a human being who is needlessly threatened by disorder in what should be an orderly world.

The characterization of the murderer is not fully developed until the explanation of the solution. This explanation Lathen offers in *Death Shall Overcome*, as in the other novels, through Thatcher's exposition in the next to last chapter. Once Thatcher provides the proper angle of vision, facts about the murderer's behavior revealed before the penultimate chapter can be seen to indict the murderer. Any clear thinking, rational reader will probably have arrived at the correct solution before the revelatory chapter.

Social Concerns

At the height of the civil rights movement, when many were singing "We Shall Overcome," Lathen was writing *Death Shall Overcome*. This circumstance comments on both the inclusion of social concerns and the attitudes toward those concerns in this and other Lathen novels. Like other of the novels, *Death Shall Overcome* is topical, and like the generality of novels in the classic subgenre to which it belongs, this novel states a position of detached moderation toward the pressures of energetic social movement. On the one hand, the novel tells of attempts to install Edward Parry as the first black to occupy a seat on the New York Stock Exchange over the objections of a "lunatic fringe" of white racist brokers. On the other hand, the book relates the machinations of radical black leaders who seem to want to exploit the impasse for their own political ends. Since popular fiction reflects the values of its audience, and since the audience for these works is the wealthy, educated, white middle class, neither the racists nor the social activists prevail. The capitalist monetary system, through its personification as John Putnam Thatcher, Vice President of Sloan Guaranty Trust, provides the economic freedom to tolerate both extremes of point of view and to control both extremes of excess. Institutions — banks, the exchange — must yield to change, but also inherently provide economic and thus social stability.

The tone of humorously ironic social criticism expressed in the title of this novel is extended in the chapter titles borrowed from familiar hymns. In the chapter titled "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," the glory attaches itself to Thatcher when he is chosen to head a committee to communicate Wall Street's color blindness by attending a NAACP meeting.



Techniques

Emma Lathen has mastered the techniques of classical or "Golden Age" detective fiction. First, the novels are narrated from the omniscient point of view, so that the reader knows through exposition and description everything about the crime except the intimate thoughts of the detective. She then establishes a closed society usually defined by a small group of Wall Street bankers and a few of their clients. In *Death Shall Overcome*, the workings of an orderly society are interrupted by a violent murder. Art Foote's death brings into play a wavering finger of suspicion which hovers over a number of suspects. Included in this list of suspects are several "red herrings" in the guise of disgruntled bankers who are either economically or socially threatened by Edward Parry's forthcoming partnership in a prestigious brokerage house.

The development of the plot further illustrates the author's adherence to classical technique. She begins with an introduction of the characters, first Thatcher himself, then his subordinates. She expands the plot with attention to the details of daily life in a Wall Street banking establishment. The action rises when Thatcher attends the cocktail party at which Parry is introduced and Arthur Foote is murdered.

Following the commission of the crime, Thatcher embarks on a search for the criminal. This search is complicated because the crime may have racial implications and because of the racial unrest generated by Parry's appointment. After producing a parade of witnesses or suspects, Lathen then presses the novel to a dramatic high point with the arrest of the murderer on the floor of the Exchange itself.

After this excitement has subsided, Lathen has Thatcher favor the reader with an explanation of the solution. In a brief final chapter, Lathen ends the novel with a slapstick version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" praising the exploits of the heroes of Wall Street.

The craft of Lathen's work can ultimately be measured by the balance she strikes between plot and filler. The topical issue of racial justice and the perennial preoccupations of Wall Street bankers are deftly handled; at the same time the action of detection proceeds smoothly. Such tight writing becomes more impressive when one knows the composition process used by Latsis and Henissart. They collaborate by getting together to draw up a plot outline, then separating to write alternate chapters simultaneously. They have become so proficient at ironing out stylistic differences they claim they can no longer look back at the earlier books and tell which one wrote a given chapter.

Themes

Greed is the unifying theme in *Death Shall Overcome*. In a sense, the Lathen novels are variations on a theme well articulated in Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale," in which greed leads to the murder of the three principals. Lathen's personal variation on the theme is to explore the effect of greed on Americans who work for economic institutions, especially those closely connected with or influenced by the New York financial community. Such a province leaves few institutions off limits to the imaginations of Mary Jane Latsis and Martha Henissart, the authors behind the pen-name Emma Lathen. By choice, they have declared hands off the university and the publishing industry. Perhaps they have chosen to do so because the university has been so well done by others including the impressive Kate Fansler novels of Amanda Cross (Professor Carolyn Heilbrun) and because the publishing industry may be beyond anyone's scope.

The institutions they have chosen to write about elicit from them, and from many of their readers, a love/hate response. In order to prevail, a capitalist democracy requires an efficient and smoothly working monetary system free from graft, greed, and corruption.

Almost all of those who make this system go are free from these evils. But a small minority succumb to temptation, stress, or arrogance, and attempt to siphon off a small fortune from the large pool of money found in major banks and brokerage houses.



Key Questions

Death Shall Overcome focuses on racism in the business world of Wall Street. In a wishful moment, one might hope that the central issue of the novel were no longer current thirty or so years after its publication, but the topic is still a hot one and still inspires heated, often angry debate. Discussion groups will have difficulty skirting the implications of Lathen's handling of the issue of prejudice against black business men and women; any discussion leaders will need to work hard to keep responses to the book clear and open minded. On the other hand, Death Shall Overcome is an excellent example of how popular authors choose topical social issues as subjects that will attract readers; the principal question from this point of view is does Lathen handle the inflammatory topic thoughtfully and sensitively, or does she exploit it sensationally — simply to sell the book?

1. Is Death Shall Overcome's handling of racial issues still topical?
2. How important is social stability in the novel? Does the novel reflect middle-class American views of social stability? Is such stability a common aspect of mystery novels?
3. Who is not motivated by greed in Death Shall Overcome? Are they credible characters?
4. Is Thatcher a dull character?
5. An interesting discussion could be generated by comparing how Death Shall Overcome handles racial issues to how Right on the Money (1993, please see separate entry) handles gender issues. Does Lathen depict women similarly to how she depicts black men? In the novels, are women or black men more welcome in the business world?
6. Does Thatcher deserve to be a heroic figure for how he handles the sensitive social issues of the novel?
7. Are the important characters fleshed out enough that we readers can detect their internal conflicts generated by the crime and the racial issues, or are they easily identifiable good guys and bad guys? Are there any personality complications that enhance the mystery?

Literary Precedents

Literary precedents for the Lathen novels abound because they are descended from the long line of "Golden Age" detective fiction. Two immediate forbears, however, come immediately to mind. Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie both seem to have influenced the John Putnam Thatcher novels.

Sayers's influence is seen in the wit, urbanity, verbal play, and comic tone of the works. Parodies of famous songs, interpolation of excerpts from newspaper articles, and chapter titles rife with verbal play—all remind the reader of Sayers, the erudite and sophisticated creator of Lord Peter Wimsey. Lathen's examination of the intricacies of daily business operations bears comparison to the use of similar detail in one of the lesser-known Sayers novels, *Murder Must Advertise* (1933).

Christie's presence is seen in the cast of stereotypical characters, and her influence looms behind the closed society format. Lathen substitutes corporate offices for Dame Agatha's country manor and Wall Street for her village High Street and thus adapts the versatile closed society group to the heart of a metropolitan financial district.

Related Titles

A popular author with a winning formula tends to repeat it, and Emma Lathen is no exception. Every Thatcher novel starts at the Sloan and ends with Thatcher's exposition of the crime in the last or next to last chapter; every Thatcher novel has comic relief by the supporting cast at the Sloan; and every Thatcher novel has as its unsung heroine Rose Theresa Corsa, secretary par excellence.

For a continued discussion of related titles, see this section in the article on *Something In the Air* (1985).

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