

# Death in a Tenured Position Short Guide

## Death in a Tenured Position by Carolyn Gold Heilbrun

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# Contents

<a href="#">Death in a Tenured Position Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>

## Characters

Reed Amhearst, Kate Fansler's husband, takes no part in this novel, leaving Kate free to re-establish contact with "Moon" Mandelbaum, Janet's former husband, whom Kate had known, along with Janet, in graduate school. Kate's ability to maintain warm, mutually-respectful friendships with men is one of her most engaging characteristics. Professor Clarkville, one of Janet Mandelbaum's English Department colleagues, is the stereotype of the pompous, chauvinistic academic, whereas Moon, a visiting professor from the Midwest, is a more complex person, sincerely concerned about Janet's plight. Joan and Suellen, the novel's representatives of the Cambridge women's community, are stereotypically if sympathetically drawn, as is Kate's niece Leighton, a Harvard senior who embodies a combination of youthful cynicism and idealism.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Death in a Tenured Position is the first of the Amanda Cross mysteries to confront directly the issue of feminism.

The central plot involves the hiring of a woman to fill a tenured position in the otherwise all-male tenure ranks of the Harvard English department. When an anonymous donor gives Harvard a million dollars to endow a chair for a woman, Janet Mandelbaum, a scholar specializing in the seventeenth-century, is hired to fill the position and is found dead in the men's room of the department during her first year. Kate Fansler's investigation eventually proves that the death is a suicide precipitated in part by Janet's disappointment at not being taken seriously as an intellectual, but instead assumed to stand for the woman's position — a sort of token. A subsidiary plot concerns a community of radical feminists in Cambridge, two of whom become peripherally involved in Janet's life at Harvard and assist Kate with the investigation of her death.

On a thematic level, Death in a Tenured Position deals with sexual inequality and misunderstanding. Janet Mandelbaum's desire to be treated as a full colleague by her Harvard peers is presented as understandable but naive; on the other hand, her refusal to even talk about women's issues creates an isolation from other women that contributes to her depression. The separatism advocated by the radical feminist group is at the other extreme from Janet's insistence that she has obtained her position because of her own expertise, but it similarly builds walls between people and groups.



## Techniques

The plot of *Death in a Tenured Position* relies more heavily upon coincidence than do many of the Amanda Cross mysteries. The fact that Moon and Janet Mandelbaum happen to be at Harvard at the same time, Kate's friend Sylvia's fortuitous offer of a Cambridge apartment, and Joan's unexpected call to Kate about Janet's dilemma are all devices used to bring a certain set of characters into conjunction. The novel's emphasis is on the social issues of discrimination and equality rather than on a realistic plausibility of plot, although Kate's investigation of Janet's death is handled with her usual intelligence and reason.



## Key Questions

It has been said that it is difficult for a woman to "make it" in a man's world. Although this phrase is usually used to describe the "glass ceiling" in the corporate world, Amanda Cross seems to be telling her readers that there are difficulties for women in the academic world also — especially bastions of male scholarship like Harvard.

Amanda Cross (the pen name of Carolyn Heilbrun) had firsthand experience in that world. In *Death in a Tenured Position* she paints interesting portraits of women like Janet who have isolated themselves from other people and women like Joan Theresa who have isolated themselves from men. She also seems to be pointing out that there are many kinds of death. Perhaps being tenured is its own kind of death.

1. Kate always quotes someone in her novels. Who does she quote here and why is it successful?
2. How does Cross depict "feminist extremists." Is it a sympathetic portrayal?
3. This work closely examines academic life. Why does Cross show us departmental meetings, parties, etc?
4. Why is it necessary to banish Reed to Africa? Why does Cross choose to have him totally absent from the scene?
5. *Death in a Tenured Position* depicts Harvard in 1979; have there been any changes in the world since then that would make the novel appear dated?

Or is it still timely? Why or why not?

6. Cross quotes a report of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences as "it has been many years since women graduate students were forbidden to enter the Widener stacks and Margaret Mead's story of a female graduate student in physical anthropology who had to sit in a closet and listen to lectures though a crack in the door is now an amusing anecdote in the social history of past decades" (p. 27). Does that statement ring true? Or does a world concerned about sexual harassment and hostile learning environments indicate that little has changed?
7. Kate finds only one book on the bed table in Janet's room. It is not what she expects. It is a Norton Critical Edition entitled *George Herbert and the Seventeenth Century Religious Poets*.

Upon examination, the text falls open to a poem entitled "Love (III)" by Herbert. When Kate shows it to Bill he says she "can't tell what it's all about" and since it was written three hundred years ago why should they bother with it? Why is the poem important and why does Cross call attention to it?

How does it add to characterization and plot of the book?



8. There is no notation in Janet's book until later, and then Kate notices that Janet had added another title "Hope" to the index. Kate searches out a copy of that poem. Why is this poem significant?

9. Kate tells Moon that he embodies the ability to take things as they come like Henry James' character Strether in *The Ambassadors* (1903). What does Kate mean and how does this quality contrast with Janet's personality?

10. Why did the women's movement fail Janet? Could her death have been avoided? Could she have been "rescued"?



## Literary Precedents

There is a long tradition of professorial sleuths. When Arthur Reeve's character Craig Kennedy first appeared in *The Poison Pen* (1911) he was hailed as the "American Sherlock Holmes". He used his brilliant powers of deduction to solve mysteries while working at a university in New York which is speciously like Columbia University. Clifford Knights's Huntoon Rogers in *The Affair at the Scarlet Club* (1937) was a professor of English in Los Angeles. He was a lively character who rarely taught, smoked too many cigarettes, and solved complex crimes. However, it was Gervase Fen, the Professor of English literature at Oxford who appeared in Edmund Crispin's *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (1944) who was to typify the absentminded-don who could nonetheless solve nearly impossible mysteries.





## Related Titles

The major social issue in *In the Last Analysis* (1964) is professional ethics, in particular the integrity of the medical profession — including psychiatry — and the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship. Kate and her friend Reed Amhearst, who works in the District Attorney's office, sleuth throughout numerous Cross mysteries.

Reed is, in *In the Last Analysis*, an Assistant District Attorney, though in later novels he becomes a professor in a law school and ultimately an international consultant on police ethics. A bachelor in this first novel, Reed is as urbane as Kate. His role in this mystery is as Kate's legal assistant, providing information and consulting a variety of experts on matters affecting the investigation. Kate solves the mystery here, with Reed's valuable help; in some of the later novels, such as *The James Joyce Murder* (1967) and *Poetic Justice* (1970), Reed actually solves the puzzle, but the initial involvement is Kate's and she remains the central character.



# Copyright Information

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