

Defending Billy Ryan Short Guide

Defending Billy Ryan by George V. Higgins

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

Defending Billy Ryan Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Key Questions.....	6
Literary Precedents.....	7
Related Titles.....	8
Copyright Information.....	9



Characters

Defending Billy Ryan is Higgins's third novel featuring Boston attorney Jeremiah Francis Kennedy. Jerry Kennedy is the narrator; he is the protagonist as well: The story focuses as much upon Kennedy and his personal and professional experiences as it does upon the case of Billy Ryan. Kennedy is a lonely, cynical, clever criminal lawyer, a good judge of character as well as a good legal strategist. His personal life evolves over the course of the three novels: He obtains a divorce from his unfaithful wife; his daughter grows up, marries, and has a child; his friends die. Teddy Franklin, the Cadillac thief who was his client in *Kennedy for the Defense* (1980) is his confidante in *Defending Billy Ryan*.

A principal charge made by the few reviewers who find Higgins overrated rather than underrated is the one-dimensionality of his characters. There is some truth to the charge, but more irrelevance. Billy Ryan, Kennedy's client, is not a fully-rounded character, nor is his son Colin, Kennedy's former classmate and the only other main character in the novel. They tend to exist in one dimension — Billy as the speculative Commissioner, Colin as the classmate who has made good in Kennedy's profession — but in that dimension, they are fully alive. Higgins's succession of novels anatomize a broad class of characters in a broad range of activities, but his breadth is not Balzacian. The terrain he covers, he covers with expertise; and it is important territory. No writer covers it with greater accuracy. He does tend to focus upon a particular aspect of his characters' experience: those moments when some stress provokes them into a competitive or defensive behavior. Higgins repudiates the label "crime novelist," and with some justice. But it is precisely because crime is the readiest source of this sort of stress that Higgins uses it so often as the occasion for his narratives. Billy Ryan is in most respects a type — the Irish-American, Massachusetts, 1980s, semicorrupt political operative; he is interesting and alive when he speaks defensively to his lawyer about his career and the sorts of semi-legal activities which have made him the man he is.



Social Concerns/Themes

The social concerns of *Defending Billy Ryan* are familiar ones for readers of Higgins's fiction: Ambitious prosecutors pursue a case against Billy Ryan, the good-old-boy Commissioner of Public Works for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The realpolitik of the American legal system, good-old-boy networks, political speculations, Massachusetts, and Irish-American families — these are Higgins's perennial concerns. He handles them here with accustomed ease and expertise.

The central theme of *Defending Billy Ryan*, again as in most of Higgins's fiction, is power. He is fascinated by the ways men (and sometimes women) jostle and maneuver for advantage in their relations with other people. The struggle may occur in the local competition of politics or the formal arena of the courtroom, or in the intimate spaces of a marriage or even a conversation. But Higgins's characters seem always in pursuit of some step up on their fellows. Because Jerry Kennedy inevitably owns his narrative, it is his pursuit of advantages that preoccupies the novel. He employs a variety of conversational tactics to hold the initiative against the prosecutors, a key prosecution witness, character witnesses, his own client, his own client's family. These tactics and what they reveal about the motives and manners of contemporary Americans comprise the fascinating core of the novel.

Techniques

The principal technique in *Defending Billy Ryan*, as in all of Higgins's fiction, is the use of dialogue as the vehicle for revealing character and moving the plot. In this respect, the novel is as good as any, and because the underlying plot is relatively simple (despite some shifting time frames), it provides a convenient opportunity for examining the revealing nuances Higgins discovers in the conversations which his characters engage in.

Key Questions

Defending Billy Ryan offers an opportunity to look at Higgins's flexibility as a writer. Over a long and successful career he has played with a wide variety of narrative structures. The broad canvas of *Wonderful Years*, *Wonderful Years* (1988), the paired "companion" novels of *Trust* (1989) and *Victories* (1990), and now the third Kennedy series novel illustrate Higgins's willingness explore different types of novel — all, to be sure types of proven marketability. Not one of Dr. Johnson's blockheads, Higgins always writes for money. The impressive quality of his work is the serious artistry with which he does so. *Defending Billy Ryan* is a series-detective/lawyer novel; but not only is it vastly more richly textured than any Perry Mason novel, it is surely richer in character, social observation, or technique than the highly praised law novels of John Grisham or Scott Turow.

1. Contrast Higgins's series lawyer with any other stereotypical series lawyer — Perry Mason, *Matlock*, *Rumpole of the Bailey*. Why would Jerry Kennedy find the transition to film or television series nearly impossible?

2. Kennedy defends Billy Ryan successfully. How does he (as he only in the end realizes) achieve this success?

How much does this matter? How much emphasis does Higgins place on the detective-lawyer plot? Why?

3. Why does Higgins frame the narrative with Kennedy's conversation with Teddy Franklin? Why is Teddy Franklin in the novel at all?

4. How important is Kennedy's family life in this novel? Compare the details presented here with those presented in the prior novels.

5. Why does Higgins devote so much space to Billy Ryan's family? Except, perhaps, for Colin, they remain fairly one-dimensional sketches, yet they play an important role in defining the world and the character of Billy Ryan.

6. To what extent are Higgins's characters stereotypical? What aspects of his characters' lives does he omit?

Literary Precedents

Although popular and prolific, Higgins has never allowed himself to fall into formula fiction. The three Kennedy novels, with their lawyer protagonist, come closest to genre fiction. But three novels over fifteen years hardly suggests factory work, and, in fact, Jerry Kennedy bears almost no resemblance at all to that mechanical paragon of lawyer-series/protagonists, Perry Mason. Erie Stanley Gardner was the master of very flat, very efficient expository dialogue; George V, Higgins's mastery of the textures of realistic speech serve his quite different art of fiction.

Related Titles

The two previous Jerry Kennedy novels, *Kennedy for the Defense* (1980) and *Penance for Jerry Kennedy* (1985), provide a background to *Defending Billy Ryan*, but each of the novels can be read as autonomous fictions.

The earlier Kennedy novels contained much information about Kennedy's own troubled private life as a husband and father. *Defending Billy Ryan* concentrates more upon the case at hand. The troubled family situation explored here is that of the client, Billy Ryan.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994