

Easy Prey Short Guide

Easy Prey by John Sandford

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Characters

As his is the viewpoint shared by the reader, Lucas Davenport feels realistic. The reader sees what he sees, hears what he hears, follows his efforts, and so he seems like a round character, one which has been well developed. On closer examination, Davenport is flat in certain areas: in this novel he does little thinking or self-examination, and it stands out. He is supposed to be a very smart man, a computer game entrepreneur and crack detective, and yet he often behaves more like a reactionary animal than a logical detective. On crimes, the reasoning given for his lack of reflection is that he lets his subconscious do the work and follows his hunches. As he does not usually make large leaps, this explanation is palatable. However, *Easy Prey* also focuses to a great extent on Davenport's romantic relationships, and here his lack of cognition is shocking. Davenport often puts aside his work to dwell on the women in his life, yet spends little time thinking. In this area, he appears immature and unintelligent, always focusing only on women's appearances, never on their personalities.

When he gives his longest speech of the novel, offering advice to his ex-girlfriend Catrin on her marriage, he shows that he is capable of deep thought regarding relationships, which makes it all the more puzzling that he practices so little on his own. The novel highlights the fact that he has little control over his libido. He does not prioritize pursuing a healthy, long-term relationship over jumping into bed with whatever attractive woman offers, whether she be a drug-using, recent incest practitioner who is only interested in casual sex, or whether she be a married woman. Since Davenport's thoughts are consistently shared with the reader, the lack of thought in this area is striking and creates an inconsistency in the supposed intelligence of the character.

Mirroring the main social concerns of the novel, after sex, Davenport's character is most involved with violence. In this area, there is some interesting character development, not so much within this novel as between books. In prior books, Davenport often displayed a violent streak, lashing out physically when he was frustrated or angry. In *Easy Prey*, Davenport finally seems in control. When his good friend Sherrill is shot, rather than seek vengeance, Davenport coolly explains to another police officer that it is a danger of the job. He pours his energy into caring for Sherrill rather than becoming enraged on her behalf, and it is this maturity that makes his ex-fiancee Weather interested in beginning a new relationship with him. We are reminded of his former violent nature by his flashbacks to college, when his college girlfriend Catrin was so concerned at the violence he displayed playing hockey that she feared he would hurt her. But in the present, we receive more evidence of his newfound maturity when he deals with a very annoying driver: whereas the old Davenport would have punched the inconsiderate driver who is causing trouble at a crime scene, the new Davenport acts with restraint. The wild Davenport still loves to speed in his Porsche and have sex with numerous women yet is finally becoming civilized in respect to violence, leaving open the possibility that he will improve in other areas as well.

The supporting characters in the novel appear flat in almost all regards. They help move the action and supply information but lack depth. Marcy Sherrill demonstrates some

complexity, but her scenes are few in *Easy Prey*. Del, a narcotics officer, serves as Davenport's partner in the book, but for narrative purposes Del is simply a straight man: Davenport swaps information with and bounces ideas off of him.



Social Concerns

Sex ripples throughout this novel of murder, usually in an unhealthy guise. In the first major scene, on the set of a fashion shoot, nipples are artfully manipulated while there is excitement over photographing a large male member. This overt sexual posing reeks of decadence, and even the lead model's mother, who sold out her morals for her daughter's fame long ago, cannot ignore how much the director is playing up the sex angle. The mother is concerned about the appearance of pornography because porno can kill a model's career—such is the moral concern of an entertainment media mother. Of course it is porno; the text makes that clear.

The next round of sex in the novel continues among the shallow, joy-chasing, drugaddict characters of the fashion shoot, focusing on female-on-female sex. Sandford uses sex consistently to titillate in this book.

Among other things, Sandford inserts a teasing sex game with throwaway characters, and likes to keep the suggestive allusions and jokes coming. Unfortunately, since the sex never takes place between characters in any meaningful, healthy relationships, and since the sexual references include so many negative connotations, including a creepy, sex-obsessed father and siblings who have practiced incest, sex comes across as a social illness.

The protagonist of the novel, Lucas Davenport, seems fully enveloped in the immature side of sex. Although he has enough maturity to give good marriage advice, his own romantic life shows him to be as shallow as the joy-chasing drug addicts he condemns. During this novel, Davenport repeatedly has meaningless sex with an exotic woman despite the fact that the love of his life is simultaneously sending him signals she is ready to try out a new relationship.

Simultaneously, Davenport is flirting with an old college girlfriend even though she is now married, and having coitus with her would obviously be a moral and emotional nightmare. He can only obsess on how great she used to be in bed. He is the hero of the novel, yet he does little to redeem sex's lowly status. On one hand, Davenport's sexual relationships are shown as fun flings, but on the other hand, in the larger context of his life, pursuing those relationships is not the most intelligent, fulfilling choice he could make.

Although the author may not have intended it, his novel develops the message that sex is dangerous. Sending visual images over the airwaves can hook people into fantasies and lead them to violent acts.

Pursuing pleasure alone robs people of meaningful relationships.

While John Sandford's sexual message can be slightly ambiguous, his message on drugs is as clear as can be. The book opens with the drugged, confused perspective of the out-of-control, soon-to-be killer. The main focus of the beginning of the novel, the



character Alie'e, immediately comes across as less than a worthwhile person because of her casual drug use. The people at the party also use drugs and then are painted as cowardly for lying about it. The main criminals in this book are all connected to drugs; Sandford clearly shows how drugs give rise to a criminal culture.

The novel's message on drugs appears as simple as the hero Davenport's; Davenport has no tolerance for drugs. Despite his attraction to Jael, the beautiful former model, Davenport voices his disapproval of her drug use right away then alternately moralizes and offers advice about drugs. The entire chain of violence in the novel can be traced back to drug trade. While other things such as speeding and sex are painted as permissible, joyous pursuits, the message rings loudly that drugs are nothing but negative.

Sandford fills *Easy Prey* with all the major social concerns of modern-day America.

Besides the sex and drugs, there is violence.

By tradition, in any detective novel, the detective needs to catch the murderer for the sake of society. However, here that need to restore order is diminished by the low worth of the victims. The first victim is a drug dealer killed accidentally by her backer, so society appears to have little at stake.

The second victim, Alie'e Maison, is an innocent bystander, but, despite her fame, she has been established as a vapid drug addict who contributes little to society, so again society has little reason to avenge her death by capturing her killer. As with promiscuous sex, Sandford portrays violence as a modern illness of America, but again, unlike the situation with drugs, violence is shown as an issue without clear sides. For instance, the brother of Alie'e, Tom Olson, lives like a saint helping others, yet he brims with a passion that make other characters think he is dangerous. Lucas Davenport has been a violent person in the previous books in the "Prey" series, and while that behavior begins to change in this novel, his tendency toward violence is repeatedly referred to in *Easy Prey*. The first murderer, Spooner, on the other hand, kills by accident. His violence is passionless, yet he is obviously a danger as the number of people he kills to cover his original crime rises. The obsessed fan of Alie'e is the traditional psychotic, as he kills a string of people for strong emotional reasons.

Still, the message about violence is complicated. In one significant case, violence actually seems a more appropriate response than the "civilized" nonviolent resolution.

After a peaceful settlement to a hostage situation wherein the captor, the obsessed fan Martin Scott, becomes a media darling, the former hostages reverse their previous acceptance of the situation and retaliate by beating their erstwhile captor. In this case, the violence is presented as a positive reaction in its emotional honesty.

In addition, as signaled from the beginning with the model shoot to the ending with Martin Scott's public capture, the entertainment and news media are another social concern in this novel. It is clear that people who "live with cameras" have no grasp of right or wrong or what is important in life. They will do anything to capture society's



attention. John Sandford, a pseudonym of the award-winning journalist John Camp, does a strong job of portraying both the alarming behavior of the media and the unhealthy appetite of the American public with scenes such as the one where Jael talks about how she "made a lot of money with her scars" or the scene where the journalists high-five each other upon learning that they have a picture of the dress the murdered model was wearing. The preacher Tom Olson sums up the novel's warning about the media: "It's a death culture, and it's here, right now. It comes out of TV, it comes out of magazines, it comes out of the Internet, it comes out of video games." Like the media it criticizes, *Easy Prey* manages to capitalize on sex, drugs, and violence, even while explicitly condemning them.



Techniques

Point of view is very important in *Easy Prey*, as it is in all the books in the series. It is Lucas Davenport's series, and, except for the occasional experiment, the story is told from Davenport's third-person, limited point of view. The narrator is privy to Davenport's thoughts and impressions as they occur. There is never the sense that Davenport learns information the reader does not or that he is keeping thoughts secret. Where the text is not dialogue, which forms the bulk of the novel, it is Davenport's perception of the setting and events, and what he is doing and thinking, such as "Catrin. He didn't know what he thought about her, but she was on his mind" Most of the sentences in the book are short or medium length as in this example, keeping the pace fast and centered in the present, on what is being quickly said or described. The strong, highly inflected narrative voice adds to the intimate feeling of the point of view.

Having a strong sense of Davenport's personality is important because the "Prey" series is as much about Davenport's character as the crimes. As Sandford fuses together elements of the classic and hardboiled detective genres, one of the key elements he brings from the hard-boiled genre is the focus on the detective's character and on the culture more than on the crime itself.

In the larger plot, *Easy Prey* roughly follows the formula of the classical detective story by introducing the detective, presenting the crime, having the investigation, offering the solution, explaining the solution, and apprehending the criminal. *Easy Prey* does complicate the classical formula greatly by having the crime occur first, having the investigation focus on the wrong victim, presenting and explaining an incorrect solution, having a second murderer, and only apprehending one of the two murderers.

In many ways, *Easy Prey* is more of a hard-boiled detective novel than a classical one because of its focus on the cynical detective and the society. However, *Easy Prey* does not contain many minor characteristics of the traditional hard-boiled detective story such as the betrayer-lover and the intimidation of the detective, and it also differs in some of the major aspects. Whereas the hard-boiled detective pursues a quixotic sense of justice, Davenport's motivation is defeating the criminal. As the narrator says, Davenport "[f]elt the dark finger of hypocrisy stroking his soul. All for justice, he thought. Or something. Winning, maybe." Davenport pursues the threads of information, seeking to capture the criminals, because it is his job and because he likes to succeed, not out of a passion to see justice done. John Sandford shows an awareness of both the classical and hard-boiled traditions, forming a hybrid that contains aspects of the two, accompanied by new variations.

Themes

Most of the themes of *Easy Prey* are submerged in the large social concerns. For example, concerns regarding violence and the influence of the media find expression in the contrast between civilization and nature. When comparing the big city and its suburbs to small cities out in the country, Tom Olson says, "We see it in Fargo, but you can still fight it there. Here . . . this place is gone. Too late for this place. Too late.

You'll see." Smaller, rural towns, closer to nature/are more protected from the dangers present in the big cities.

Sandford reinforces the contrast between nature and culture with his protagonist's entry into the story. Davenport begins the book out at his country cabin on a lake. He goes for a friendly morning of companionable fishing with a friend. We see how he allows a neighbor to store a tractor at his place, and then, as a favor, Davenport hauls a boat back to a farmer's house. The lake community appears to resemble an old-fashioned small town of friends. As soon as Davenport heads back into the big city, he meets the woman he is going to consider committing adultery with, and he is swept into the big, drug-related murder case. All the peace and quiet of the country have vanished.

Of course, even in the big city certain positive attributes exist. The city is not without friendship and loyalty. The tremendous concern all the detectives show for their wounded comrade, Marcy Sherrill, is very touching, reinforcing the theme of loyalty. After having so many unsympathetic characters portrayed and killed, it is refreshing for the reader to be concerned over the death of a character, or a potential death in this case, because through cheering for Sherrill to survive, the value of human life is reinforced.

Among the characters concerned for Sherrill, Davenport in particular shines.

Though the two had a romance in the past, Davenport appears to do a better job of showing emotion for a woman he is not currently involved with than for any of his current romantic interests. That said, having a friend hovering on the brink of death is a relatively easy situation within which to show concern, so although the theme of emotional loyalty is present even in the city, not too much can be made of it.

Key Questions

The primary purpose of genre fiction is widely held to be to entertain the audience.

Entertainment appears a priority in the "Prey" series: these books are full of murder and detection, sex and violence. However, even though these novels are doubtlessly meant as an entertaining sideline to the author, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist John Camp, they do contain pertinent commentary on our society in addition to the action. This commentary is particularly sharp in *Easy Prey* where Camp explores a topic he is an expert on, the media, within his detective story.

1. In what ways does the media appear decadent in *Easy Prey*? Are there ways that the media could be coerced to behave more morally that would cause more good than harm?

2. Do big cities foster moral corruption and then spread that corruption into small towns via the airwaves? Is smalltown life more moral than big-city life?

3. Is Lucas Davenport a sympathetic character? Does he seem a strong hero?

Does he possess good morals?

4. How would *Easy Prey* be affected if it followed the classical detective formula more closely?

5. What do you think of the female characters in *Easy Prey*? Are there any generalities that can be made about how women are portrayed in it?

6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working within well-developed literary traditions such as the classical detective novel or the hardboiled detective novel?

Literary Precedents

The classical detective novels that established the basic formula Sandford plays off of include all the classics of the genre including the Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Rex Stout mysteries. The hard-boiled precedents most significantly include Raymond Chandler's and Dashiell Hammett's mysteries, which appear to influence Sandford's "Prey" series in regard to its cynical, tough detective and the corrupt nature of society.

Related Titles

The considerable number of books in the "Prey" series attests to its popularity. Most of the "Prey" books spend time on Davenport's romantic relationships, but *Easy Prey* focuses more on this area than many, showing Davenport at a crossroads between multiple perspective partners. Also, *Easy Prey* is a milieu book more than usual, as it focuses on the media and its effect on society. As discussed under "Characters," Davenport appears to be evolving between books, here gaining control of his violent nature.

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