

Eight Million Ways to Die Short Guide

Eight Million Ways to Die by Lawrence Block

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Characters

The central character of the series is Matt Scudder, a grimy, hard-drinking, ex-cop with a private eye. Scudder's guilt at accidentally killing a child when he was trying to stop a robbery led to his quitting his job with the police force and leaving his family in the suburbs to live by himself on the edge of a very transient life, making his headquarters a neighborhood bar, Armstrong's. He is the opposite of the organization man, but he uses old contacts in the police force to obtain grudging information, meticulously paid for in cash. He is a professional, without an organization, without even a partner. He eschews bureaucracy, paying no taxes but tithing at various churches where he finds quiet and momentary sanctuary. His clients comprise various kinds of city characters: a prostitute, a pimp, a bar owner, a cop, a dead bag lady, a dead blackmailer, the father of a murdered wife, and the father of a murdered hooker. His associates are people from the bars he hangs out in: waitresses, bartenders, and other customers.

The villains are similar urban types—a Columbian drug dealer, a repressed minister hipped on sexual sin, a cop who wanted to kill his wife, a politician who wanted to become governor, an aid to a special prosecutor, an actor working as a bartender, and a salesman who wanted to get rid of his wife. The villains are often hypocrites, pretending to a legitimacy within the system. Unlike Scudder, they do not recognize that murder is not just a little corruption, that it is stepping across an irreversible boundary, a trespass that calls for exposure and vengeance.

Social Concerns

One obvious social concern in the Matt Scudder mysteries, and especially in *Eight Million Ways to Die*, is the plight of the city, here New York City.

The novels present a picture of a city out of control. One symptom of that plight is the rampant lawlessness: from people smoking on the subways to muggers who not only want money but want to kill their victims. The violence that is part of the life of the city appears most grotesquely in newspaper reports of it, in screaming tabloid headlines and in the stories disappearing in the wake of further atrocities, fresher and more monstrous. An example of the randomness of the violence is the report of a television set found on the curb that blew up a family when a man took it home and plugged in the booby-trapped device. In addition, the chaotic savagery of drug dealers seems to violate all ideas of innocent bystanders or of bounds to their vengeance. Another aspect of the city out of control relates to the inability of the police to deal with the extent of the lawlessness and violence and to the corruption, from mild to outrageous, of the police themselves.



Techniques

One of the unifying techniques in *Eight Million Ways to Die* is the reflection of the macrocosm of the city in the microcosm of the detective. Just as the city is out of control with millions of strangers of different backgrounds crammed into a small space together (like riders on a subway) where law enforcement is futile and lawlessness can strike at any time (as in the case of a transit cop killed for telling a passenger to put out his cigarette), so Scudder goes out of control, falling into an alcoholic blackout and waking up in a hospital with a doctor wanting to commit him to a detoxification center. Aristotle said that memory provides the thread that makes one an individual human. A man without the faculty of coherent memory of his actions is less human and less humane than one who knows what he is doing and what he has done. The city forgets yesterday's headlines, perhaps intoxicated by the sensationalism; Scudder loses his memory of yesterday in alcohol. The city's violence is documented daily in newspaper headlines. Scudder's violence surfaces in an alley where he fights off a mugger and when the young tough is unconscious, Scudder breaks both his legs. In that chaos, Scudder's and Chance's and the two prostitutes' decisions to change their lives for the better are the one small gleam of hope for the almost unredeemable city.

The novel employs an interesting variation on a traditional means for creating and sustaining suspense. Traditional hardboiled detective stories often present the hero menaced by the villains who want to kill him to prevent his bringing them to justice. *Eight Million Ways to Die* uses the familiar device. Scudder is warned through the grapevine to forget trying to find Kim's killer. The unknown killer may strike at any moment, and at the end of the novel Scudder makes himself a target to lure the killer out into the open by announcing publicly that he knows the killer's identity. The novel creates more suspense, however, when Scudder finds a car climbing the curb, seemingly ready to run him down, a car that he is sure must belong to the killer, and Scudder is unable to fire his gun at him. The car holds relatively harmless drunks, but the question is raised whether Scudder can and will defend himself. A further element of suspense is added with the detective's acute alcoholic condition. Scudder seems likely to fulfill the doctor's prediction that he will kill himself with drink fairly soon.

Besides the danger of alcohol poisoning to Scudder's system, are the dangers of his being vulnerable to the violence of Kim's killer or to random city violence, to his being robbed or beaten or killed for being helpless on a city street. With those acute dangers, Scudder's counting off AA meetings attended, bars passed and not entered, and temptations to drink withstood all contribute to suspense about whether Scudder will survive.

Themes

A central theme in the Matt Scudder series is the alienation from the venal society around him of the good man.

Scudder is a man living on the edge, who has resigned from conventional roles of supporting himself with a steady job in an organization and of sustaining a marriage and family. He is a loner, making what peace he can with the world around him, and doing his detective work as an unofficial favor to a friend. Money from each friend in question allows him to survive day to day, precariously. Scudder also has a sense of craftsmanship or professionalism: He is a detective because that is what he does best, working not just for the money.

Another important theme implicit in *Eight Million Ways to Die* is that people can change, in small or large ways, despite seemingly overwhelming odds against their attaining a better life. Scudder's first client in the novel is a prostitute who wants to get out of the life. Kim is killed, leading Scudder to try to find her killer.

She is not successful in gaining a better life, but by the end of the novel, two other of Chance's girls (Chance had been Kim's pimp) get out of prostitution: a poet and a woman who had been pretending that she was doing research to write a book about the life. Chance is seriously thinking of going from being a pimp to becoming an art dealer. And Scudder, who has been attending AA meetings, giving nothing more than his first name, is able to declare himself an alcoholic, a crucial step toward recovery.

A continuing theme throughout the Scudder series is that the detective is effective in discovering the truth, even if he cannot bring back the victims who have been murdered. Hard-boiled detective novels are often concerned not only with solving the mystery but with achieving justice by exposing the killer. Scudder makes the killer pay in official or unofficial ways, partly through confronting him with his own guilt.

Adaptations

The novel was adapted to the motion picture *8 Million Ways to Die*, which was released in 1986 by TriStar. The motion picture was produced by Stephen J. Roth and directed by Hal Ashby and stars Jeff Bridges as Scudder. Bridges is perhaps too soft and cuddly for the role, even though he turns in a fine performance, and this may account in part for the picture's tepid reception by American audiences. Rosanna Arquette plays Sarah, a performance that gained her new attention and praise; it may have helped her to obtain more roles as a woman of the world. In the other principal roles, Alexandra Paul plays Sunny, Randy Brooks plays Chance, and Andy Garcia plays Angel Moldonado. The screenplay is by Lawrence Block, David Lee Henry, Oliver Stone, and uncredited Robert Towne. So many writers often spells confusion for a screenplay, which may account for the motion picture's occasionally murky plot. On the other hand, the mystery itself is a good one, and those viewers who have not read the novel will probably be kept guessing at the identity of the murderer until the climax.



Key Questions

A good place to begin discussion may be the relationship of *Eight Million Ways to Die* to other hard-boiled detective novels.

Is it unique in any way? Does it rehash old territory? Is its appeal primarily to fans of hard-boiled detective fiction, or does it reach for a wider audience? From these questions a discussion can move on to how individualized the characters are and whether the novel features valid social criticism or is merely borrowing clichés from the hard-boiled detective subgenre for its background.

If group members are of a philosophical turn of mind, then focusing on Scudder's unhappy personal life and the harsh, cruel world of crime in which he works could generate a good discussion. It can be hard to tell the good from the bad in *Eight Million Ways to Die* because pimps and prostitutes, traditionally untrustworthy people, may be more humane than the novel's representatives of law enforcement and social classes above them.

Is Block commenting on modern American urban society? Is he reaching beyond social commentary to a more universal view of suffering, compassion, redemption, and justice?

1. Is having a prostitute pretend to be a writer in order to leave her pimp intended as humor, perhaps to lighten the narrative? Does it suggest that Block may be having fun with the traditions of the hard-boiled detective novel?

2. What are the defects of urban society from Scudder's point of view? Does the novel suggest any other defects that Scudder may not notice or care about?

3. How important is the bleak underworld that forms much of the background for the narrative to the novel's themes? Is it merely set decoration, or is it more?

4. Why does Scudder have problems with women? Are his relationships with men any better than those with women?

5. Whose responsibility is it for Scudder's alienated, drunken, often lost life?

Does *Eight Million Ways to Die* offer clear sources of responsibility, or must we guess at them?

6. Is the mystery suitably mysterious? Is it central to the novel's success as a literary work, or is it secondary to something else?

7. Is there any hope for better lives for the downtrodden characters in the novel?



8. Scudder sometimes is very violent. Is his violence justified by circumstance, morality, or justice? How often is his violence a working out of the daydreams of members of the novel's audience? For instance, do people daydream of breaking a mugger's legs?
9. Is Scudder the best person to go to for help when a murder has been committed?
10. Which characters engender sympathy? What are their qualities that encourage sympathy?
11. Who are the most revolting figures in the novel? What sets them apart from the other characters?
12. Is the society depicted in the novel doomed to decay and eventual disintegration? Will the actions mitigate against or encourage decay?
13. Who are the scapegoats in *Eight Million Ways to Die*? What is their function in the plot? How do they help develop the novel's themes?
14. Which is more important in the novel, the atmosphere of social degeneration or the individual characters living within the society?
15. Are the characters in *Eight Million Ways to Die* predestined by their places in society to live lives out of their control, or do the characters have a degree of volition, allowing them to shape at least part of their lives?

Literary Precedents

Block's Matt Scudder is a hard-boiled private investigator in the mainstream of a tradition whose classic ancestors are the detectives of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Such detectives have often been hard-drinking like Hammett's Sam Spade (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930; see separate entry) or Nick Charles (*The Thin Man*, 1934). Often, however, the detective's drinking has been used to establish his superhuman capacities. Here Scudder's drinking is used as a flaw that keeps him vulnerable, a common man who is uncommon in his integrity and in his tenacity in dealing with his own problems. Chandler set his detectives in the mean streets of a city, a setting that Block creates with authenticity. Chandler's detective was not to be mean himself, but a kind of knight without armor, battling injustice. Scudder is a very battle-weary knight but he still fits the mold of the champion of justice, seeking to stop killers from getting away with their murders.



Related Titles

The first Matt Scudder mystery *In the Midst of Death* (1976) introduces the theme of corruption, and specifically police corruption, with the claim that the whole city is for sale and with the character of Jerry Broadhurst, a cop who always had an angle and who never lived on his police salary, who is now blowing the whistle on his fellow cops, informing to a special prosecutor about police corruption. The situation precipitates an examination of the limits of loyalty and virtue with the axiom "a man's got to make a living" expressing some kind of ethical limit to pragmatism and self-interest.

Scudder's hopes for a new life and a new love, after being raised, are dashed, and the novel declares that people do not get the opportunity to change their destinies.

Sins of the Fathers (1977) sets up a parallel family situation as the relationship between Wendy, the murdered hooker, and her businessman stepfather is contrasted with the relationship between Richard, her roommate, arrested for her murder, and his minister father. The parallel rests on the anxiety and disapproval of the fathers for the lifestyles and sexuality of their children. A repressive religious system is portrayed as destructive. Scudder affirms again that it is harmful to society when murderers go unpunished. But the story of his framing a murderer earlier creates an ambivalence since the framed man is killed in prison.

The action seems to attest that causing someone's death is wrong unless that action is revenge against someone who has already taken a life, an ambiguous position.

In *A Time to Murder and Create* (1977), Scudder has been hired by the dead Spinner, a blackmailer, to avenge his death, caused presumably by one of his blackmail victims. The gritty urban atmosphere is continued, and the detective is more enmeshed in the guilt and destruction. He is the immediate cause of the suicide of the least culpable blackmail victim. Scudder detects by pretending to take over the blackmailing and by making himself a target for the murderer. Violence seems endemic, and the case is solved only by a process of elimination. Privilege and power are finally defeated by the honesty of Scudder, who draws the line at murder.

A Stab in the Dark (1981) examines parallel kinds of marriages and ways of dealing with their imperfections as Scudder attempts to discover who killed Barbara Ettinger. He and the sculptor Jan walked out of their unsatisfying marriages. One suspect remained married but had a series of affairs. Another would rather kill his wife than bear the shame of leaving her. He says that he hated being married so much that he had to kill somebody. Matt continues his policy of not drinking with murderers, a sign of his control, but also of the fragility of his control of his drinking. The theme of the disintegration of the city is extended.

When the Sacred Ginmill Closes (1986) is set in the past in 1975 when Scudder is drinking but still functioning fairly well.



He takes his sons to baseball games and he seems to be dating, rather than falling into relationships or into beds. Instead of declaring that no one can change his life, Scudder says that people move on and their lives change. The double plot, built on two cases that Scudder has taken on, involves in each case ethnic groups that are maligned—Irish toughs and revolutionaries and Hispanic street youths.

Each group may have its problems, but each is being made an easy scapegoat for robbery and murder. Vengeance is still presented as a sympathetic course of action. To try to achieve justice, Scudder again arranges evidence to frame a murderer for another crime. A character expresses the American dream as being able to steal from the boss until one can afford to open up a business and compete with him, equating material success with corruption. Here as throughout the series, Scudder repudiates the myth of success. Worse off than the usual hardboiled detective with a hole-in-the-wall office, Scudder has only his usual table at his neighborhood bar. The apocalyptic feeling is continued as he mentions characters who have since died or moved out of the city and into oblivion. Nothing remains, not even his sacred hangout, Armstrong's. With Armstrong's gone, Scudder is displaced entirely. In the present time of the fiction, Scudder is on the wagon, a new direction or an end to the series.



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

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