

Even the Wicked Short Guide

Even the Wicked by Lawrence Block

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Contents

Even the Wicked Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	5
Techniques.....	7
Themes.....	8
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	10
Related Titles.....	11
Copyright Information.....	12



Characters

Matt Scudder is the detective who began in the hard-boiled tradition of hard-drinking loners outside the establishment, here the law-enforcement establishment. In the first mystery of the series, Scudder has already resigned from the police force after a little girl was killed by one of his ricocheting bullets in a shoot-out on the street. He has been divorced from his wife and in effect from his two sons. In subsequent writings, Scudder has joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and going to meetings is part of his routine, as well as an indication that there is a gravity to his life. Even the Wicked refers to recurring characters in earlier books of the series: his second wife, Elaine; his assistant, T. J.; his A. A. sponsor; and Mick Ballou, bar-owner and gangster (who is only mentioned). Elaine is a former prostitute, who invested her money in real estate. Now retired from the sex trade, she owns and manages a boutique at which T. J. sometimes works as a favor to the Scudders. Matt also employs him when he needs an investigator with street contacts. T. J. is a young black man who can speak and dress black or white, depending on the needs of the situation. T. J. also has contacts with computer hackers, and he is aware of the benefits of technology in the detective business. T. J. and Matt keep in touch by means of T. J.'s pager since T. J. also roams the city when he is not assisting Matt.

An important character new to the Matt Scudder mystery novels is the newspaper columnist, Marty McGraw, who hangs out in a topless bar and drinks as relentlessly as Matt did in his first few published adventures. The "Will of the People" letters threatening to kill people seen as abhorrent to society are originally sent to McGraw. McGraw is in a line of newspapermen who will do anything to get the story. After the first "Will" sends McGraw his hit list, and after people on the list are killed, there is a lull. McGraw stirs up more trouble when he writes a where is "Will" when we need him column, calling for more revenge. Then the second "Will" writes and keeps the story—and the killing—going. McGraw turns out to be a disappointed man, even with his columns in the Daily News and the influence he wields with his readers.

In his younger days he had wanted to be a playwright. Even though McGraw can think clearly, he is led by his resentments and grudges.

Another important character is Adrian Whitfield, a defense attorney who hires Matt to discover who "Will" is. Whitfield gives Matt a retainer. When Matt recommends that Whitfield hire some bodyguards to protect him while the police work on the "Will" case, Whitfield suggests that Matt use some of the money to find out who killed Byron Leopold. Whitfield here seems characterized by random kindness, which allows Matt to pursue a second plot line, a second case. Looking back from the end of the action, the reader feels the arbitrariness of Whitfield's action more than the kindness. He wants Matt to keep in touch with him and to work slowly on the "Will" case.

Whitfield was threatened by "Will" for "keeping guilty men out of prison," a charge that Whitfield denies. He cites his necessary function in the judicial system, and Whitfield reminds Matt that his clients are innocent until proven guilty. In addition, he says that his



most notorious client, Richie Vollmer, is serving time in prison. Whitfield is pleasant and smooth, and he treats Matt almost as a colleague who understands the legal system.

Another lawyer, Ray Gruliow, is a person whom Matt can consult for legal information and talk cases over with.

Gruliow takes over Whitfield's last client, making an appeal that the accused was not fully represented by Whitfield. Gruliow also represents the killer in the viaticum case. As they talk things over, both Gruliow and Matt inform the reader of the inside legal view. When Matt demonstrates knowledge about the legal system, he gains in stature as he is accepted by the lawyer as an equal.

Jason Griffin plays a small part, but he is interesting as an apprentice detective who aids Matt when his investigation takes him to Cleveland. The young man is a nephew of a cop Matt had met on a previous case. Jason provides enthusiasm and a discussion of stake-out techniques.



Social Concerns

A primary social concern in *Even the Wicked* is people who profit from other people's dying from AIDS, specifically a practice called "viaticum." With this practice, people can buy up an AIDS patient's life insurance policy, gambling on the patient's dying soon and producing a profit for the investor of twentyfive percent or more. The patient is paid substantially less than the face value of the policy by the insurance company.

With the payoff, the patient can pay medical expenses and not be destitute when he or she can no longer work.

The detective Matt Scudder investigates the murder of an AIDS patient who is a friend of Ginnie's, a woman Scudder knows from Alcoholics Anonymous.

Scudder investigates the murder for her as a favor, so that the victim Byron Leopold and his death are not written off by the overworked police. The police give attention to cases they have a chance of solving and closing. A technicality—that murder is considered to be accidental death with a double payoff—is ironic and is tempting to a viaticum investor who wants even more money for his fail-safe investment.

In one sense, AIDS is the social concern; in another sense, it is the callousness of the insurance companies who pay patients much less than the face value of their insurance policies, treating them not as the dying, but only as investments. A further element of social concern is the example those companies set for greedy investors who are not satisfied with the high rate of return on their investments but who want to double the profits. The investors can rationalize hurrying those inevitable deaths. The social problem with the last two elements is greed. (That acquisitiveness is reflected in miniature by the police who search the apartment of the victim and pocket money and jewelry, and by the superintendent of the building who tells Matt to take for himself the brass elephant that Matt's friend, Ginnie, had given Byron as a token of her love for him.) Matt is invited to purloin whatever takes his fancy. Of course, the superintendent expects a payoff.

Another social concern involves the main case of the detective story that Matt is paid to investigate. Matt is pursuing a killer who sets himself up as a vigilante, sending letters to a newspaper, denouncing his targets as menaces to society. The targets are subsequently murdered and the assassinations encourage a spirit of vengeance in the public who read and hear about these self-righteous killings.

Block seems to have transposed the effects of the worst, most irresponsible talk radio shows onto a print medium, reminding readers of the power of the word to enflame the public.

The original killer who signs himself the "Will of the People" inspires someone else to kill one of the targets on his list. Moreover, when the first "Will," sick with cancer, kills himself, another copycat "Will" continues the chain of murders for his own vengeance.



An important social concern is the atmosphere of resentment and rage that multiplies and encourages people to take the law into their own hands. The victims are guilty of actions that the community despises—at least parts of the community—but two wrongs don't make a right. The contagion of hatred spreads. An alternative is to let the law take its course, a lesson that the usual private eye mystery rejects.

Techniques

Even the Wicked is part of the Matt Scudder series of hard-boiled detective fictions. One of the major concerns of that genre is a desire for justice that may not be achievable within the regular police and judicial system. The private detective is a supplement to the system, someone who can look around corners or behind the scenes as Matt does the case of Byron Leopold, asking cuibono or who profits from the shooting of Leopold. The police would be more likely to write off Leopold as an accidental victim of a drug transaction that ended violently.

Instead, T. J. is able to contact a drug dealer who witnessed the killing but who would not volunteer his information to the police. The private detective and his associates can discover information that official channels would not pick up.

Another source of information not even consulted by the overworked police is airline records that Matt accesses by offering to pay an airline employee to inform him about passenger names on specific flights. T. J. keeps arguing with Matt that much of the information gathering would be easier and more efficient with a computer, which the pair acquire by the end of the story. Although privacy issues might very well be of social concern, in this mystery Matt and T. J. are interested only in how a computer would make their information gathering faster and more accurate. Suspense, of course, is a staple technique of the detective story, and Even the Wicked attains this quality partly by interweaving the two cases and by having Matt focus his attention on leads he obtains on either case in turn. We want to know "who done it," but also how the killings were done and how the detective solved the mysteries.

Themes

A theme that appears to be woven into the fabric of the novel is that of the value of personal relationships to family and friends. The social concerns are with an impersonal system—viaticum—that distorts the human process of dying. The other concern is with the spread of hate that another impersonal system—communications media—can use to obviate the judicial system and to poison the community. Here Matt's relationships to family and friends are flexible and humane. They can grow as Matt's relationships to Elaine and T. J. have grown over the course of the detective series. In this mystery, a change can be seen as Matt resists Christmas and the imperative of Christmas shopping until finally he chooses gifts for Elaine and T. J. that demonstrate his affection for them and that please them. A substantial amount of space is given over to the small details of Matt's daily life and his family and friends. Those relationships develop.

They are opposite to news stories that seem to burst like bombs and then fade into nothingness as yesterday's horror story is replaced by the story of today's atrocities. Personal relationships take effort to create and they can be positive.

News stories are often ephemeral and gruesome. Many ordinary people believe that reporting violence graphically helps create more violence, an idea that the plot here reinforces.



Key Questions

A context in which to understand *Even the Wicked* is the hard-boiled genre of private eye novels. Instead of simply solving the puzzle of who is the killer, the private eye searches for justice that may not be obtainable through the regular law enforcement and judicial systems. Often the private eye bends the law to further justice. However, the detective must have his own code of right and wrong. He must take responsibility for his sometimes violent actions. The reader is usually led to see the poetic justice of the detective's solution to the killer's crossing the line of civilized behavior.

1. Consider to what extent media coverage of scandals degrades the quality of life of ordinary people leading their individual lives. Is a columnist like Marty McGraw guilty of an injury to public life and welfare, just as a murderer is guilty of destroying an individual person? Is freedom of the press a preeminent value despite potential abuses of that freedom?

2. In another mystery, *The Burglar in the Library* (1998; see separate entry), Block satirizes the English country house mystery as being artificial, and the American hard-boiled form is praised as being more realistic. Do you find *Even the Wicked* realistic or does it follow the formulas of the hard-boiled genre? Does the seemingly personal material about Matt's life make the novel seem realistic or does it interfere with the solving of the crime?

3. Traditionally, the hard-boiled detective was solitary, a man alone in the mean streets. In this novel, Matt is almost a surrogate father to T. J. and to a lesser extent to Jason. Matt is thoroughly married to Elaine. Do these relationships make him less of a hard-boiled detective?

4. Are the killers in the novel treated more sympathetically than in many mysteries? Are there extenuating circumstances that explain and make the reader excuse the killers? If a thirst for revenge is an evil in the novel, does the hero have to take a compassionate stand toward the killers? Can the reader be less compassionate than Matt and not violate the spirit of the novel?

Literary Precedents

Block's Matt Scudder mysteries locate themselves in the tradition of hard-boiled private eye fiction. Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet are two early classic writers in the genre. Until the last decade or so, that tradition has been predominantly male in its authors, its protagonists, and in its value system. The form has bordered on the misogynist with female characters mostly femmes fatales who tempt the detective with money and sex to stop investigating the murders or to take the money and the treasure for themselves. Even the *Wicked* plays against this pattern with Elaine depicted as Matt's faithful love and companion, even though she had been a prostitute for many years. As a repeated endearment, Elaine says that Matt is her "bear." Elaine has her own financial security with her real estate investments and her boutique. She does not have to pressure the detective to acquire money for her enjoyment or security. The result of this situation is that as a woman she is portrayed in a more sympathetic light than the genre usually paints women.

In many hard-boiled mysteries, police detectives are depicted as corrupt and brutal in contrast to the private detective, a figure of integrity. Because of their independence, private eyes can refuse to compromise when important community figures want the investigator to stop asking questions. The private eye can be loyal to his client, but he can also refer to his own sense of justice in deciding how much violence to use or how much to report about a case. In this example of the form, Matt does not have much contact with the New York police, whom in former cases he has had to pay off for information. Instead, he is contrasted with the lawyers who must defend guilty clients. Matt is hired by lawyers or by a large security company to earn his daily bread. With his private clients, he can accept or reject cases. In depicting two important characters as lawyers, Block may have been influenced by the popularity of legal fiction in recent years, but no scene takes place in a courtroom, and the main focus here is on the detective.

Related Titles

Even *the Wicked* is different from earlier Scudder mysteries in the series in its extensive use of lawyers as characters and in its extensive discussion of legal matters. In the earliest Scudder mysteries, Matt was a hard-drinking, hard boiled private detective who helped people that the law, i.e. the police officers, could not help. He was a marginal man, overwhelmed by guilt at his having killed a child in a police shoot-out. In the middle examples of the series, readers learned how Matt got sober by attending A. A. meetings and became more respectable, partly through his association with Elaine, a hooker who also invested in real estate.

Elaine's talent for business helped to make her part of Matt's more respectable life. In some of the middle novels, Matt became friends with Mick Ballou and Block experimented with the criminal centered mystery. As a professional writer, Block follows trends in the overall mystery field, and the recent popularity of lawyer fictions may have influenced his Scudder version of adventures of the lawyer outside the courtroom.

A further aspect of this particular Scudder fiction is the attention paid to Marty McGraw, the newspaperman.

Through McGraw, Block explores shock journalism: the consequences of the calls to violence are part of tabloid irresponsibility.



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