Finnegan's Week Short Guide

Finnegan's Week by Joseph Wambaugh

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Contents

Characters

Character has always been a primary strength of Wambaugh's fiction. His plots and scenes have always been competently developed, but it is the behavior and language of his men and, increasingly, his women that provide the main interest. This behavior and this language tends to be extravagant.

Wambaugh is not much of a psychologist; he does not pursue Jamesian nuances. Subtlety appears sometimes in the nonfiction books, as he attempts to interpret the character of real persons, but his fictional figures express themselves in large gestures. When he is successful, these large gestures make for entertaining and memorable personalities. Abel Durazzo and Shelby Pate belong in this category.

Wambaugh's protagonists have always been cops. His early cops were also large gesture creations. His later cops have tended to be cut to pattern: white, male, fortyish, divorced, near retirement, alcoholic, blessed with uncommon given names (Winnie, Lynn, Finbar). They are more pathetic than wild. The cop protagonist of Finnegan's Week is white, male, aged fortyfive, thrice divorced, not-quite-alcoholic, blessed with the given name "Finbar." He is distinguished from his immediate predecessors by his ambition to be an actor and by his low sperm count. He frequently mentions his meekness, which he attributes to having been raised by three sisters. He is a San Diego police detective assigned to crimes against property.

Durazzo and Pate abandon the Green Earth Hauling and Disposal truck which they used to haul the navy boots in Mexico and report it as stolen in San Diego; this brings Finnegan into the case.

Wambaugh's cops were never exclusively male; even in the early novels, women cops played important roles, and always confronted the difficulties involved in being a woman and a cop.

In the later novels, the women often rise nearly to co-protagonistship. Finbar Finnegan's near-co-protagonists enter the case pursuing its two coincidental features. Bobbie Ann Doggett is a young, attractive petty officer investigating the missing load of navy boots.

Nell Salter is an attractive, fortyish excop working with the District Attorney's office, investigating environmental crimes. She pursues the Guthion dumping.

The three protagonists converge on the nefarious Green Earth Hauling and Disposal trio, Temple, Durazzo, and Pate. Part of the interest lies in seeing how they approach their investigation; part lies is seeing which of the two women gets Finnegan (or, which of the two women Finnegan gets). None of the three investigators is a Poirot or a Wimsey; Poirots and Wimseys have never functioned in Wambaugh's world. Like all of his cops, they stumble a lot and they each have their moments of insight. Although the action is usually perceived from Finnegan's point of view, he is not to any important

degree the more competent investigator. Bobbie Ann Doggett makes the terminal arrest; Nell Salter wins Finbar Finnegan.

Social Concerns

The chief social concern of Wambaugh's early novels might best be described as The Collapse of American Civilization as Embodied in the Moral Disintegration of Los Angeles, California. His cops were lonely centurions patrolling mean urban streets in the twilight of an empire. Since the 1980s, his novels have been somewhat less ambitious, focussing principally upon one selected aspect of the collapse of the culture. In The Glitter Dome (1981), it was Hollywood; in The Delta Star (1983), it was academics; in The Golden Orange (1990), it was the Orange County rich. In Finnegan's Week, it is environmentalism.

The crime which brings the three cop protagonists of Finnegan's Week together involves the illegal dumping of American toxic waste across the border in Tijuana, Mexico. A man and a boy die as a result of contact with the poison, Guthion; another boy is hospitalized. The villains appear at two levels.

Jules Temple runs Green Earth Hauling and Disposal. Although he has no direct responsibility for the fatal dumping and would never engage in such a riskily egregious violation of environmental laws, Jules is willing to commit any safe trangression when he sees a profit in doing so. He is the deliberate despoiler of the environment and clearly the most despicable of the villains. The other villains — two of Jules's hirelings — belong to the lumpenproletariat and, in the way of the world, commit the fatal dumping. They are no more callous than their boss, but their opportunities for crime are cruder, and they take what they can get. The dumped Guthion is incidental to their purpose; the barrels happen to be in a truck which they steal to convey a load of stolen Navy boots to a fence in Mexico. Environmental disaster, then, in Finnegan's Week, is a byproduct of venal greed.

Wambaugh does not overemphasize this social concern. He does not sermonize about the environment as, in comparable situations, John D. MacDonald might, nor is the concern as central as it is in the novels of Carl Hiaasen. But he clearly takes the opportunity to insert a warning about the specific, horrific consequences of this particular manifestation of the decline of moral standards in contemporary America.

Techniques

Though its title plays on that of James Joyce's last masterpiece of linguistic pyrotechnics, Finnegan's Week does not attempt to claim avant garde status. Wambaugh has never been a stylistic innovator. His novels reflect a competent realism in setting and plot, a realism based on a more than competent knowledge of the realities of the world he writes about. He usually adds to this fundamental realism a characteristic touch of black comedy and, as a balance, of sentimental melodrama.

Although he often employs very effective colloquial speech, he is not a George V. Higgins. The language of Wambaugh's characters is entertainingly vivid, but he does not attempt to create their world in their own voice.

Wambaugh's originality lies in his material and in his point of view. In the early novels, the material was the underbelly of a late twentieth-century American city — squalid, perverted, corrupt — and the point of view was that of the policeman who patrolled its streets. The authenticity — clearly artful, and not naive — of both was impressive and established Wambaugh's reputation. In his later novels, such as Finnegan's Week, the material and the point of view are still authentic, but as he has moved upscale, his material has become rather less distinctive: authentic chronicles of handsome actor-cops pursuing environmental crimes in a fairly unsqualid, unperverted, uncorrupt San Diego lack the cutting edge of the Los Angeles novels.

Wambaugh prefaces Finnegan's Week (as he has prefaced every novel since The Glitter Dome) with a couple of paragraphs of thanks to the people, mostly cops, who assisted him in authenticating his narrative. Two points can be made: One, the early Wambaugh wrote from direct experience of the streets of LA; he did not need authenticators then. Second, Wambaugh's commitment to authenticity remains strong and creditable. Twenty years after retiring from police work and from Los Angeles, he cannot possibly replicate the same immediacy. The setting of his fiction has moved with his life. His novels now require research, and he does research them, very carefully. As a result, although it may have lost existential edge, his fiction retains its sharp realism, portraying southern Californian life the way southern Californian cops experience it.

Themes

Wambaugh's main theme is, as always, good vs. evil, with the cops embodying good and an assortment of criminals embodying evil. Good in Wambaugh's fiction is always flawed by weaknesses, usually weaknesses of the flesh, and sometimes tragic weaknesses; evil in Wambaugh's fiction is never banal, and often is exuberant and even zany. In his early novels, there was an element of hysteria in his depiction of the extremes of good and evil, a sense that the representatives of both forces were losing control. The cops were often suicidal; the worst criminals were sometimes viciously sadistic. In his later fiction, as he moved toward more producing more conventional best selling cop novels, he restored a degree of normalcy to the good and the evil. In The Golden Orange, Wambaugh actually wrote a traditional detective story, with a concealed plot that at the end artificially reverses the apparent meaning of the action; nothing hysterical — or even very exuberant or zany — here. In Fugitive Nights (1992), the narrative seems as interested in the developing romance between the detective-protagonists as in what turns out to be the noncriminal mystery that inaugurates the action.

Finnegan's Week restores a touch of the earlier wildness, but it remains a fairly domesticated narrative. The good cops are slightly eccentric; the bad criminals are moderately exuberant.

There is a central crime — the dumping of toxic waste — which leads inevitably to a series of violent deaths. Two of the criminals — Jules Temple, the entrepreneurial violator of environmental laws, and Soltero, the Mexican receiver of stolen goods — perceive crime as good business and murder as a useful business strategy. They — and Temple especially — represent the utterly amoral upper-class criminal that Wambaugh seems to have concentrated upon in his later novels. Temple's death — shot by one of the three investigating cops — concludes the novel's action.

Abel Durazzo and Shelby Pate, employees of Green Earth Hauling and Disposal, introduce a wild element; Shelby Pate especially recalls the madmen who frequented Wambaugh's earlier Los Angeles novels. Durazzo is the half-smart idea man of the team; Pate is a burly biker who has fried his brains with drugs and is now reduced to pursuing a few violent pleasures with a degree of low cunning and a residue of maudlin sentimentality. He is one of Wambaugh's most colorful creations. Durazzo plans the theft of a truckload of Navy shoes, but events — and his partner — begin to spiral out of his control. Both Durazzo and Pate are killed by other criminals.

The annihilation of the three principal villains signifies the proper restoration of justice as prescribed by the tradition of the crime novel. And as the evil are punished, so the righteous are rewarded: The ambivalent relations between Finnegan and the two attractive women-detectives are also properly sorted out in the end. These resolutions are important, but there remains the lingering awareness that the death of Jules Temple hardly solves the larger problem of toxic waste; and there are certainly numberless disadvantaged Mexicans and Americans ready to replace Abel Durazzo and Shelby

Pate. Wambaugh ties up his plot with neat justice, but, he implies, that justice is achieved more easily in plots than in the world.

Key Questions

Finnegan's Week is a fine example of Wambaugh's later fiction. One might begin by comparing it to one of Wambaugh's first novels. Clearly there has been a gain in professional technique; Finnegan's Week is a smoothly constructed, highly entertaining narrative.

What has Wambaugh gained over the years? What has he lost?

1. Is the environmental social concern overplayed or underplayed? Is Wambaugh merely being politically correct by inserting such a crime as the premise of the action? Or does the dumping of toxic waste echo thematically in a novel about other kinds of corruption in America?

2. How do you judge Wambaugh's treatment of Mexicans in the novel?

Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have played a prominent role in Wambaugh's novels from the very beginning. (African-Americans, by contrast, have generally occupied token roles.) Is Wambaugh successful in creating Mexican individuals, not Mexican stereotypes?

3. There is a clear class division in the criminal world of Finnegan's Week.

Durazzo and Pate are proletarians; Temple is an entrepreneurial capitalist.

There is no moral confusion; both classes are judged and condemned by the narrative. But in what ways does Wambaugh show that his sympathies lie with the proles?

4. Who is the protagonist of the novel? In what ways do Finbar Finnegan's experience and vision come to dominate and define the action of the novel?

5. In Bobbie Ann Doggett and Nell Salter, Wambaugh offers two women who nearly achieve protagonist status.

Are they plausible characters? Equally plausible? Could Wambaugh have written the novel with one of them as the true protagonist? How would the novel have been different had he done so?

6. How credible is the romantic subplot? How important is it? What would have been the effect if Finbar had ended up with Bobbie Ann?

7. How does Wambaugh use humor?

Which characters carry the burden of comedy? Finnegan and Pate are both funny at times. What is the difference between their funniness.

8. How is justice served? Do the right characters pay the right penalties?

9. Wambaugh's novels of the 1970s have a clear relevance to the major problems — racism, corruption, brutality, and incompetence — which have so notoriously plagued the Los Angeles Police Department in the 1990s. But although Wambaugh's recent novels have left the mean streets of LA for the kinder, gentler environs of more upscale southern California, his depictions of policing from the policeman's (and increasingly, the policewoman's) point of view may still be relevant to an understanding of what seems to be going wrong in contemporary urban police departments. How do novels that portray the horrors, the farces, and the routines of police work from the inside alter the reader's view of the practices of real policemen? Wambaugh's novels compel the reader to identify with the police; does this identification lead to some sort of sympathy with real cops?

Literary Precedents

Wambaugh was an unprecedented phenomenon. Many American writers have focussed upon crime in the big American cities, and many of these — such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser — have been journalists who really knew the ugliness of the crimes and the cities. But Wambaugh is the first policeman to successfully portray the policeman's intimate view of the ugliness. His success spawned a whole subgenre of books, films, and television shows — written mostly by noncops — which adopt the gritty cop'seye view of the city. But Wambaugh was the originator.

A pair of peculiar precedents or, more exactly, contemporaries might be mentioned. Wambaugh is one of three Irish-American authors who began to write naturalistic best-selling fiction about crime in American cities in the 1970s. The first was George V. Higgins, whose The Friends of Eddie Coyle appeared in 1972, two years before The New Centurions (1974). The second was William Kennedy, whose first novel, The Ink Truck, actually appeared in 1969, but who found his voice in Legs (1975). Both Higgins and Kennedy have made more of their Irishness than Wambaugh; both have written about cities — Boston and Albany respectively — where Irishness matters (as it does not in southern California). Finbar Finnegan actually happens to be Irish, but his provenance seems of little significance. It is doubtful that Wambaugh has ever perceived himself as an Irish-American author.

More importantly, both Higgins and Kennedy have achieved a greater critical respectability than Wambaugh, although Higgins is still undervalued.

All three writers found their own distinctive voices and present their own distinctive visions of the world. What seems to give the advantage to Higgins and Kennedy is the original stylistic element which each adds to his novels.

Higgins is the great contemporary master of relating narrative through conversation. His novels are often tour de forces of character-revealing, plotadvancing talk. Kennedy's addition is a touch of poetry — the ghosts and mysteries which haunt his characters.

Wambaugh's comparable innovations — his policeman's realism, with its cynical edge, and his gift for black comedy — have thus far been rewarded more by readers than by critics.

Related Titles

Wambaugh has deliberately avoided tying his novels to one another. There are no series protagonists; there are no recurring characters at all. Since he abandoned Los Angeles, even the scenes of his novels seem to be conscientiously varied. The novels of the 1990s have tended to focus on the more upscale social environments of Southern California. The cop protagonists of these novels have, of course, remained middle class, but even they tend to have milder characters. Floaters (1996) continues this trend. The special setting of Floaters is the America's Cup race held off San Diego in 1994. In the 1970s, Wambaugh's fiction produced an anatomy of the big American city in the process of collapse into violence and moral chaos. In the 1990s, the novels are producing a portrait of the moral chaos (and, to a lesser degree, the violence) that lies beneath the rich, sunny surface of the Southern Californian version of the American dream.

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