

The Fourth Deadly Sin Short Guide

The Fourth Deadly Sin by Lawrence Sanders

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Characters

None of the characters of *The Fourth Deadly Sin* is developed in depth. Each has his or her distinguishing traits which may or may not affect the investigation. For instance, Helen Venable is notable for her resentment toward men, who she believes steal credit for her work. Thus, she does not pass on important information to Delaney, delaying his solving the case. The main character Delaney has his own significant traits: a love of police work, an ability to strike just the right tone when interviewing suspects, a passion for his wife, and a love of sandwiches.

Descriptions of his bizarre sandwiches abound in the novel, and his relentless passion for them is probably meant to be endearing, but they have little to do with the plot. Even so, Sanders's powers of description make the sandwiches look very good.

Personalities are important to the progress of the plot. The police hunt for the singular personality who would want to murder and mutilate the corpse of a man who was universally admired. Beyond that, their own personalities help shape events, not always for the best. Venable is not alone in withholding information. Detective Ross Konigsbacher, in spite of despising homosexuals, finds that he likes his undercover duty with suspect L. Vincent Symington, who showers Konigsbacher with gifts and takes the policeman out to sumptuous meals. Thus he delays checking out Symington's alibi and then hesitates to report his findings, fearing that he will lose his cushy assignment. Timothy Hogan is not especially intelligent; he knows his limitations and tries to do all of his work strictly by normal police procedures.

On the other hand, other investigators bring good qualities to their work.

Detective Robert Keisman realizes that his suspect's confession may not be true and keeps digging for evidence.

He accepts the help of Jason T. Jason without rancor. Jason proves to be a good interrogator and a good hunter for clues. Further, they are compassionate, which helps them unearth the truth. Brian Estrella gets right to the heart of his investigation of Mae Otherton, and his straightforwardness proves valuable when he must work with Venable. Sergeant Abner Boone is a capable researcher and a quiet man, and he serves as a good foil for the argumentative Delaney. The most problematic figure among them is Benjamin Calazo, who is about to retire. He is used to dealing with a mentally disabled relative, so he takes on the investigation of Isaac Kane, an intellectually handicapped painter of landscapes who has violent outbursts. His patient police work and patient conversations with Kane lead him to the truth about Kane's possible involvement in the murder. This same compassionate policeman later brutalizes and tortures a very nasty bully, using the same care he took in studying Kane. It is hard to reconcile the careful, tired, old cop who wishes he would never have to retire with the vicious one who meets out extralegal punishment on a wrongdoer. Perhaps he is from an earlier era of police work, when street justice was sometimes the

only justice. These personalities are more important than even those of the suspects. The mixture of personalities of the police team shapes the events of the novel.

Social Concerns/Themes

The Fourth Deadly Sin belongs to a subgenre of the mystery story called the "police procedural," which focuses on professional police methods to solve crimes. Typically, they emphasize the seamier, more physically demanding aspects of everyday life within a community, usually a large city.

Thus, *The Fourth Deadly Sin* touches on police brutality, sexual dysfunctions, adultery, homosexuality, and greed, and features characters such as thugs, prostitutes, psychotic Vietnam War veterans, inner-city priests, as well as a cross-section of society: homeless, butchers, clerical workers, government employees, and rich psychologists. The social ills presented by the novel serve primarily as background to the solving of the mystery and are not discussed in depth.

Mental illness is presented in some detail because the novel's mystery focuses on the murder of a psychiatrist, probably by one of his patients. Six of his patients are presented, each with his or her own special psychological problem. For instance, there is Joan Yesell, who has tried to commit suicide; she is a retiring, lonely woman who is constantly bullied by her overbearing mother. The whys and wherefore of her suicidal tendencies are not explored in depth, but are presented as motivation for her actions related to the murder. Each patient is dealt with similarly, not in depth but for motivation. Together, they form a picture of the ills that result from the stress created by living in a society that is too complex and too unforgiving of unusual behavior. Sanders adds a twist by using psychology to point out the unsuspected murderer.

Techniques

The police procedural is governed by technique. Its essence is the following of the techniques used by professional law enforcement officers to solve crimes. Thus most of *The Fourth Deadly Sin* involves the step-by-step procedures of identifying suspects, interviewing them, tracking down witnesses, and ferreting out clues. Sanders gives his detectives three mysteries to solve: 1) Who killed Ellerbee? 2) What was the motive for killing Ellerbee? 3) What accounts for the two separate tracks of wet footprints to the office of Ellerbee? If there is a weakness to the novel, it is that the experienced reader of mysteries is likely to figure out the answers early on. On the other hand, the pleasure of the book, as it is for other police procedurals, is following how the police solve a case.

Sanders is very good at describing settings, and his portraits of locales as diverse decaying slums and upscale gay bars ring true, adding a tone of authenticity to *The Fourth Deadly Sin*.

He further enriches the background of the novel by giving his characters family lives. Delaney must incorporate his wife and his stepdaughters into his daily activities, and Suarez, and Boone, and others have lives that extend beyond their work. This is a good element to have in a police procedural; in real life, the police have lives beyond the work.



Themes

In *The Fourth Deadly Sin*, Sanders develops three principal themes: psychology, self-image, and police politics.

It is the last one that gets the plot moving. Deputy Commissioner Ivar Thorsen is, as always, embroiled in political intrigues in the New York police department. He has been shepherding his proteges up the departmental ladder to positions of authority, and one of his favorites, Acting Chief of Detectives Michael Ramon Suarez, who is a good administrator but a poor detective, is in trouble because he is having difficulty solving a high-profile murder case; if he fails to solve it by the end of the year, he will not become the permanent Chief of Detectives. To help Suarez, Thorsen turns to former Chief of Detectives Edward X. Delaney, the master of detection, and asks Delaney to run an independent investigation of the murder in order to solve it before year's end, and Delaney, to help an old friend and because he likes to solve mysteries, takes on the task of organizing a small group of police officers into an investigation team.

Psychology as a profession is an important aspect of the mystery.

Throughout the novel, psychology is presented as a valuable aid to people who have been marred in some way by their experiences. The murder victim, Simon Ellerbee, is portrayed as a wonderful man who helped his patients cope with their lives and to heal some of their deep psychological wounds.

These wounds are primarily important to the plot in terms of self-image. Each of the prime suspects suffers from a poor, even hateful self-image that could have motivated them to kill Dr.

Ellerbee — when he revealed too much of his inner self to one of his patients, that patient murdered him in outrage.

The blows to Ellerbee's eyes could thus be accounted for — he had seen more of the murderer's self than the murderer could tolerate.

As part of their investigation, the detectives pry into the self-images of the suspects. A few of the officers are bad at this because they cannot see past their own preconceptions of their suspects. One officer suffers a beating in part because he just could not see into the personality of the man he was tailing. Another manages to get over his distaste for homosexuals to understand that the man he was investigating could not commit a violent act. In general, the investigators carefully match alibis against evidence, but they work hard to understand their suspects, in order to develop the motivations of each. This latter effort proves important in eliminating the false confession of a man filled with self-loathing. Their failure to penetrate one person's self-image results in their overlooking the murderer.

Adaptations

Frank Sinatra stars as Delaney in the motion picture version of *The First Deadly Sin*, released in 1980. Faye Dunaway plays his beloved, dying first wife, and David Dukes plays the deranged serial killer. The motion picture is routine at best, with lackluster performances.



Key Questions

The Fourth Deadly Sin may not lend itself well to group discussion. Calazo's behavior might spark some debate, but the novel is fairly straightforward, with little to discover beneath its surface.

1. Why does Sanders describe Delaney eating sandwiches as often as he does?
2. What part of the mystery took you the longest to solve? Why was it harder to figure out than the other parts?
3. Does Delaney take too long to figure out what is going on? Why would he be so slow?
4. Why does Sanders depict weaknesses in his police officers?
5. Are suicidal people really less likely to commit murder than other people?
6. Are you convinced that the detectives found the guilty party? Why would they not be able to get a conviction in court?
7. Is Calazo a heroic figure?
8. Is Suarez a good choice for Chief of Detectives?
9. The police officers eat very well; do real-life police officers have that much money to spend?

Literary Precedents

The police procedural may have originated in the hard-boiled detective tales by such masters as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Sanders is one of the reigning master of this genre: others include Evan Hunter and Joseph Wambaugh.

An interesting allusion is the romances about medieval knights errant.

Like King Arthur, Delaney assembles a group of knights of the round table (the team of detectives), and he sends them off on quests for truth. The novel even provides a parallel to the evil sorceress Morgana, in the person of a woman possessed of mystical knowledge, motivated to do evil, and equipped with the ruthlessness to carry out a devilish crime.

Related Titles

In *The First Deadly Sin*, Delaney is still a police officer, and he tracks down a serial killer. In *The Second Deadly Sin*, he has retired, but as in *The Fourth Deadly Sin*, his services are needed to solve the murder of an artist. In *The Third Deadly Sin*, he finds another serial killer. Each is a police procedural, showing how the police would track down murderers.



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