

Freaky Deaky Short Guide

Freaky Deaky by Elmore Leonard

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Characters

The novel begins and ends with Chris Mankowski. More than just a police detective attempting to solve a series of crimes, he is the moral center of *Freaky Deaky*. A pleasant guy, committed to his career but struggling to keep a job on the force, Mankowski is portrayed in a thoroughly believable manner. In 1985, Leonard said in an interview: "My cops, I feel, are real cops I try to make them as real as possible. My cops cut corners a little bit, just as the real ones do."

This is not to say, however, that Mankowski is in any way tainted by corruption. He is an ordinary person in a scrape, but by the end of the novel, the reader is certain that Mankowski will prevail. He is the hero, and in Leonard's books the protagonists always succeed.

Career success, however, may not necessarily extend to Mankowski's personal life. He has difficulty establishing enduring relationships with women, in ironic contrast to his father's success in this regard; but Greta, equally at loose ends, may turn out to be the one that Chris has been seeking, as a lost soul groping his way through the city's "mean streets."

Also groping are the criminals Skip Gibbs and Robin Abbott. Having served time for blowing up an army recruiting office in Detroit in 1971, they have since been involved in murder, extortion, drug dealing, and theft. This pair of disreputable thrill seekers may be immoral, but they are not wholly despicable. Like many villain heroes, they are intriguing, compelling, and complex; and while Leonard provides little room for sympathizing with their actions, readers may admire the social conscience that initially motivated their unremitting struggle against authority.

But there is reason to question their motives, for Skip says to Robin: "You gonna tell me we were trying to change the world? We were kicking ass and having fun."

And political philosophy does not motivate Robin's plot against the Ricks brothers. She aims to settle an old score and maybe make some big money at the same time. She and Donnell Lewis, at one time sexual as well as political partners, have a common goal, although his is as much racially as financially motivated. Donnell differs from the other characters because of his sense of humor, and since Leonard presents the life and times of Woody Ricks from Donnell's perspective, his wryness imbues the situation with a comic absurdity.

With many of the characters in *Freaky Deaky*, as elsewhere, Leonard blurs the distinction between the good and the bad. The result is that his characters are less stereotypical and more realistic than usually is the case in crime fiction.

Social Concerns

Social activists of the 1960s who are aiming to settle old scores in the 1980s are the focus of both the narrative and social aspects of *Freaky Deaky*.

Now in their late thirties, the former revolutionaries are no less angry than they were two decades ago. Skip Gibbs and Robin Abbott remain unreconstructed outsiders. However much their disruptions helped to advance social change, they still live in the past, haunted by old hurts and bent on revenge.

At the other end of the social spectrum are the rich boys, Mark and Woodrow Ricks. Encouraged by a superficially liberal mother, they flirted with the fashionable left-wing politics of the 1960s, but then evidently betrayed their radical friends. In the 1980s, Mark and Woody also are maladjusted, although cushioned by vast wealth. Amidst this quartet of aging former rebels, Leonard has placed Donnell Lewis, a former Black Panther who emerged from the radical movement as an unscrupulous gold digger and the amoral lackey of oafish Woodrow Ricks. The moral paragon of the cast of characters is a bomb squad detective, Chris Mankowski. Also a college student in the 1960s, Mankowski protested in Washington and participated in Woodstock; he then shipped off to Vietnam, where he was wounded. Although Leonard portrays him sympathetically, Mankowski — like his adversaries — is a psychological and social misfit who flirts with criminality.

In sum, in *Freaky Deaky* Leonard explores the seamy underside of the legacy of the 1960s and dramatizes a series of human problems, even tragedies, that had their origin in that hectic and heady period.

Techniques

Leonard has previously utilized the technique of writing a novel from different narrative points of view, which he does in *Freaky Deaky*, but here he tries a new technique, on three occasions writing from perspectives distorted by drugs or alcohol. The characters are Skip Gibbs (who takes acid), Ginger Wyatt (who is given drugs without her knowledge), and Woody Ricks (who awakens in an alcoholic daze). Each of the remarkable scenes provides a singular insight into the person, though it does not necessarily advance the plot.

Themes

The search for identity and one's proper place in society is the primary thematic focus of *Freaky Deaky* and is developed in different ways through the varied characters. Skip Gibbs, "a thirty-eight-year-old-kid," is a ponytailed, bearded demolition expert whose twenty-year odyssey (with time out for a prison term) has taken him from coast to coast and to Europe. But at the end of the novel he still is searching, and his final thought is that he is "too old for this." Robin Abbott, his compatriot and former lover, also remains torn at age thirty-seven between the stable and affluent world of her parents and the revolutionary society of her college days. Symbolic of her continuing identity crisis is the escapist romantic fiction she writes under a pseudonym. Mark Ricks cannot fully establish his own identity because he is financially dependent on his brother and must do his bidding, despite his own desires. His brother Woodrow, their mother's heir, is an obese lout, usually in an alcoholic fog and scarcely knowing who he is. Donnell Lewis, a black man out of place in an alien milieu — technically is Woodrow's servant but actually runs his life — attempting to gain total control over his employer, although he lacks a clear sense of what or even who he wants to be. Chris Mankowski is drifting and rootless in another way. His relationships with woman and his father are in flux, as is his career. Symbolic of his lack of stability is the fact that he does not have a home of his own, which leads the Detroit police department to suspend him. A minor character, although important to the identity crisis theme, is Ginger Jones, an aspiring actress whose real name is Greta Wyatt; her indecisiveness about which name to use reflects a debilitating ambivalence about who and what she is.



Key Questions

In an introduction to a 1985 omnibus volume of three Leonard novels, political columnist George Will says, "Leonard's novels are about marginal people, small people incompetent at even petty crime; or his novels are about quiet professionals who, like Leonard, are underestimated for a long time." Given the large and varied cast of *Freaky Deaky*, any discussion probably will revolve about its characters. Although Will wrote three years before the publication of *Freaky Deaky*, his statement could be a means of providing an initial focus to a discussion.

1. In *Freaky Deaky*, Leonard presents a gallery of losers. Are there any winners in the novel?

2. A critic has written of the "masters of manipulation" that people this novel. Who are they? Do they differ from each other? Is this character type present in other Leonard works?

3. The ex-convict is a familiar character type in Leonard novels. To which earlier ones are those in *Freaky Deaky* most closely related? How do they differ from other ex-convict Leonard characters?

4. Leonard develops his characters largely through dialogue, people revealing themselves by what they say.

Since Woody Ricks is so inarticulate and usually inebriated, by what other means does Leonard develop Woody's character?

5. How does Chris Mankowski function as the moral center of the novel?

What is the significance of his having been suspended from the police force?

6. Leonard develops his identity crisis theme through different characters. How does each enrich the theme or make it more substantive? What other Leonard novels have the search for identity theme?

7. On the basis of this novel, what do you think is Leonard's judgment about the legacy of the 1960s social upheavals?

8. Although Leonard has disclaimed being influenced by the leaders of the "hard-boiled" school of American crime fiction (Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Ross Macdonald), most critics place him in this tradition. What aspects of *Freaky Deaky* link him to the "hard boiled" school?

9. What role does the conflict between delusion and reality play in the plot?



10. "Leonard's rich thrash about in a frenzy of acquisition . . . and their wealth weighs heavily on the susceptible who try to emulate them," says Robert Sandels in an article written prior to the publication of *Freaky Deaky*.

To what extent is the statement relevant to this novel?



Literary Precedents

Leonard has a habit of reworking old characters. Donnell Lewis, Woody's houseman in *Freaky Deaky*, recalls Cornell Lewis, also a black servant, in *Stick* (1983). In addition to similarities of name, race, and occupation, both are handsome and witty fellows who function as social commentators. Leonard's focus upon Chris Mankowski's — a police detective whose private life may impinge upon his job performance — personal problems recalls Ed McBain's treatment of policemen in the 87th Precinct novels (please see separate entries).

Related Titles

After using the South and Atlantic City for several books in the early 1980s, Leonard returned to his old haunts with *Freaky Deaky*, for between 1974 and 1981 he had produced seven novels in which the Detroit area was his primary milieu. Also, Raymond Cruz, hero of *City Primeval* (1980), briefly reappears in *Freaky Deaky*, as do some other Detroit policemen.

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