Fuzz Short Guide

Fuzz by Evan Hunter

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Characters

One of the reasons for the 87th Precinct series' long-running success is the ensemble of characters McBain has assembled and developed through the years. Led by Steve Carella the books feature the on-going lives of several main and secondary figures who weave in and out of the stories. We follow Steve's career as a police officer as well as his personal life. He meets Teddy, a deaf mute, with whom he falls in love and later marries and has two children.

One of the novels even involves Teddy in a case where she is placed in great danger and is almost killed. Although their lives together are not always central to the story line, the relationship between Steve and Teddy does much to leaven the violence and mayhem of the crime narratives. As a policeman Carella faces the usual bureaucratic frustrations encountered by anyone working inside a large metropolitan organization. He has to work with incompetents, suffer spiteful superiors, and often makes peace among his colleagues. Several times he has been seriously hurt, almost dying once from a gunshot wound.

Of lesser importance are the other primary members of the squad room: Meyer Meyer, Cotton Hawes, and Bert Kling. Each is individualized enough to take him from episode to episode and to engage the reader's interest in following his individual life. Although they are not as developed as Carella, they are not stock characters either.

Meyer worries about his premature baldness and his Jewishness, and in the early books his wife tries to find Carella a woman. Bert is younger and is not married. He enters as a rookie and works his way into the force, learning the police officer's trade in the process.

His love life contrasts with the stable and happy marriages of Carella and Meyer. He seems plagued by bad luck when it comes to women. His compulsive need to be in love drives him from woman to woman in search of sexual and emotional security. In many ways Bert changes more than the other central characters, and the changes are often the result of his various relationships with women. Cotton Hawes is an ex-serviceman from Boston who was imbued from his youth with a puritanical streak which is only suggested in part by the fact that his father named him after the puritan divine Cotton Mather.

The rest of the figures in the squad are less well developed and tend toward a two-dimensionality which locks them into a set of consistent personal traits and quirks. Moscolo looks after the precinct's files and makes the worse coffee in the world. Arthur Brown is the only Afro-American detective at the station, and he has a running battle with racism both inside and outside the station house. Ollie Weeks (Fat Ollie) is a capable detective, but his racism, personal body odor, and barbaric manners make him a foil for the others. Lt. Peter Byrnes is the respected head of the squad; Andy Parker the sadist of the division; and Dick Genero the stupidest cop in uniform. In addition,

there are various higher-ups in the police echelons, an assortment of informers, street types, and ethnics who provide background to the series.

McBain learned from The Blackboard Jungle (1954) how to create a tight-knit professional group enclosed within a larger urban institution. When he came to develop the 87th Precinct series he simply moved his group from the teacher's lounge of the high school to the squad room of the precinct. This closed society allowed him to explore the interactions of the individuals while still involving them in a wider social context. The idea has worked well in the 87th Precinct series, allowing him to achieve the utmost economy in characterization while maximizing the carry-over effects in the on-going narrative.

Social Concerns

Since 1956, when Cop Hater was first published and inaugurated the series, almost fifty 87th Precinct novels have appeared. They are set in an imaginary city called Isola, the Italian word for "island," which has, along with other geographic features of the landscape, led readers to make the not-too-difficult leap of understanding that Isola is Ed McBain's thinly disguised New York City. And if the reader goes through the novels in chronological sequence the social concerns of the books certainly mirror those of not just any large American urban environment but more particularly New York.

As he did in his first successful novel, The Blackboard Jungle, which examined the plight of the city's schools during a transitional phase of urban life, so the 87th Precinct novels trace the evolution of the police over a longer period.

Like Balzac's Comedie Humaine, whose interlocking series of novels chronicled nineteenth-century French life, the 87th Precinct books have traced the various changes experienced by New York over the past forty years.

The increase in urban crime, especially that produced by the rising infection of the drug trade in urban America, the ethnic shift in the city with its resulting tensions, the decay of the city's infrastructure, the flight of the white population to the suburbs — all of these social issues have been taken up serially over the years. As the neighborhoods have shifted in ethnic makeup, McBain has explored the resulting clash of racial identities. When the explosion of drug usage took place, the 87th was confronted by an escalating number of crimes and shift in their intensity. As the city lost much of its economic base because of the migration of the white population away from the city proper to the outlying suburban areas, the public services felt the squeeze, and none more so than the police department. The proliferation of guns on the street shifted the weapon of choice from the home-made zip gun of the gangs to the semiautomatic weapons of the drug organizations. As the quality of life declined along with the collapsing infrastructure, so did the civility among citizens on the street.

The incidence of violence rose as did its frequency and randomness.

The 87th Precinct novels have reflected the shifts in urban life since the Second World War with all of its inequalities and social stratification. The rich have gotten richer and more remote from the daily lives of most of the other inhabitants of the precinct, although the area of the novels does transcend socioeconomic boundaries and contains a cross-section of the urban life, showing that rich and poor alike are effected by the changes in the city. Ed McBain's police series presents the most comprehensive fictional portrait of urban life in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Techniques

Ed McBain writes out of the traditions of the hard-boiled detective novel first developed in its present form by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in a series of distinguished crime novels from the 1920s through the 1950s. Unlike his predecessors however McBain developed his fiction within the precincts of the police department.

He has also admitted a debt to Ernest Hemingway and claims to have learned how to write dialogue from reading his fiction. The tough-guy style, which the distinguished American critic Edmund Wilson described as "the boys in the backroom," is an indigenous American discovery and characterizes a good deal of the fiction written since the First World War. It is an especially male form of writing and effectively captures the modern urban sensibility.

Unsentimental, direct, economical, this style of writing was perfect for depicting the industrialized landscape of modern American life. Often used for more directly polemical purposes by committed 1930s writers, such as Daniel Fuchs, Mike Gold, and John Dos Passes, it has proved to be especially durable in contemporary crime fiction.

Although the crime novel was born from the traditions of the dime novel of the nineteenth century and was extended by the pulp writers of the 1920s and 1930s, since the war it has experienced a transformation by a generation of writers, like Ed McBain, who have expanded its range and smoothed out its style. The crime novel today is far more an adaptable form than the genre fiction of the pulps, and it is now little different at times from any other modern type of fiction.

Themes

The themes of the 87th Precinct novels follow the social concerns and milieu contained in the narratives of the individual books. How does one survive in such an urban world? Who become victims, who are the victimizers? How does a person retain his or her humanity in the face of such overwhelmingly negative forces, many of which are violent to and destructive of civilized life? What ways do city dwellers learn to cope with the constant fear of violence? In an atmosphere of fear, how do families survive, raise children, earn a living, and care for themselves?

Is it possible to instill traditional American values of hard work, fair play, and upward mobility in a world so destructive of human values?

In spite of such a broadly based set of concerns, however, McBain's novels are not primarily sociological studies, and he particularizes each novel by tracing the personal lives of the various members of the station house and by creating specific characters for each novel to set off against them. One of the main reasons for reading the 87th Precinct books in sequence is to follow the lives of the individual cops with their various personal relationships, both inside and outside of the professional setting. For example, many of the novels involve family members of the precinct cops or move to settings which directly incorporate their personal lives. The crimes they investigate involve them as individuals as well as public servants entrusted with keeping the city's peace. This particularizing of the stories not only demonstrates that the police are human beings like the people they serve but also illustrates that they are vulnerable to the urban violence and decay as well.

Fuzz is a novel which also points to the limitations to which the police department is subject. The individuals who make up the 87th precinct are not super heroes; they, too, fail to solve many of the crimes they investigate.

One of the "series within the series" that McBain has created are the "Deaf Man" books. Fuzz is the second of the narratives in which he appears. A criminal of cunning and intelligence, the deaf man haunts the 87th and defies their best efforts to capture him. He has a diabolical criminal mind and in Fuzz he extorts money from the city by threatening to assassinate various city officials, often killing them even after he apparently has been bought off. At the end of the novel he has escaped once again even though the police have, for the moment, stopped his current killing spree. The novel also exposes the fallibility of Steve Carella, the central character of the series, when, in an attempt to capture some youths who are setting fire to derelicts in the area, he is beaten severely, having failed to anticipate their resourcefulness.

These police novels also are funny.

McBain writes hilarious situations, often absurd and surreal, and captures the humor urban dwellers develop in order to survive in this often hostile environment. In Fuzz, for example, the station house is being painted by two hapless city workers from the

maintenance department who manage to dribble green paint all over everything and everybody in the squad room. McBain has long felt that his use of humor in the books is responsible for them not getting the recognition they deserve.

The critics may find his comic turn of mind distracting, but McBain's readers love it and the humor in the books is one of the main reasons for their enormous popularity.

Adaptations

Fuzz was made into a mediocre film, released in 1972, directed by Richard A. Colla and starring Burt Reynolds, Raquel Welch, Jack Weston, and Tom Skerritt, with Yul Brenner as the Deaf Man. The movie tried to mix laughs with excitement in an oddball way but did not have the style to pull it off.

One critic described the film as an effort to create a M*A*S*H of police dramas.

Several attempts have been made to film the 87th Precinct series. Rights to three of the novels were acquired by William Berke, a producer-director at United Artists, in the late 1950s. Cop Hater (1958) was shot entirely on location in New York City with Robert Loggia playing Steve Carella, and the film received good notices, especially from Variety's reviewer. The second book filmed by Berke, The Muggers (1958), was also shot in New York with Loggia repeating his role as Carella, but the film was not received well. The third, The Pusher (1960), was directed by Gene Mitford with Robert Lansing taking over for Loggia as Carella and with a screenplay by Harold Robbins.

The third film proved to be the last of the series. One other 87th Precinct novel, King's Ransom, was also made into a movie High and Low (1963).

Two of the 87th Precinct novels have been made into films in France. Sans Mobile apparent (1971) based on Ten Plus One and Le Cri du cormoran le soir au-dessus des jonges (1971) based on A Horse's Head.

For the most part the 87th Precinct novels have eluded television adaptation. The hit show Hill Street Blues copied the format of the 87th Precinct novels but did not credit the original series, in spite of using an ensemble cast and driving multiple parallel stories. It did much to prevent any further development of another series with the characters and locale of the 87th Precinct.

In March 1995, a made-for-television movie called The 87th Precinct aired as a possible pilot for a future television series. Based on the novel Lightning, the television adaptation failed to capture the grittiness of the original or to adequately portray the essence of the central figures. Especially disappointing was Randy Quaid's portrayal of Carella. Most 87th Precinct readers will probably be disappointed in the movie.

Key Questions

Because of the wide range of social topics raised by the 87th Precinct books, as well as their timeliness, they should provide excellent sources for group discussion. And they could easily be included in a more general examination of crime fiction or mystery writing, or more specifically in a comparison of various "police procedurals," especially if compared with many of the European series.

1. How is the city depicted in Fuzz and what does that depiction tell us about contemporary urban American life?

2. In what ways does the humor in the novel work in the narrative? Think not only about comic relief from the grimness of the plot but also in broader terms about the general function of humor in literature.

3. What do you make of the Deaf Man? In what ways does he enrich the narrative, or complicate it?

4. Notice how the various overlapping stories compliment each other.

How does one mix with another and what does it do toward both driving the story and extending it?

5. In what ways is this a "formula" novel? In what ways does this novel transcend what we think of as the limitations of such fiction?

6. Some of the critics have noted that Fuzz is in many ways a kind of parody of "police procedurals." In what ways is that so?

7. How does the relationship among the various members of the 87th Precinct squad work in the novel? In what ways do their individual stories link together to tell a larger one?

8. If the reading group is familiar with other police crime novels such as those by Georges Simenon or Joseph Wambaugh, they might like to discuss this 87th Precinct novel in light of these other series books.

9. What sorts of narrative mileage does McBain get out of having a series set in a police station with a regular crew?

10. How do the personal events and facts of the lives of the police interact with the crime story of the novel? How does McBain connect the personal with the professional in the crafting of the tale?

Literary Precedents

Ed McBain has created the longestrunning series of police novels in the history of American crime fiction. It is also the most successful. Although the series falls into the category of the "police procedural," McBain would bristle at the use of that term. Police series like the 87th Precinct books have a longer tradition abroad than in the United States. The prototype police procedural is unquestionably the Inspector Maigret novels of the prolific Belgian writer Georges Simenon.

Simenon largely created the Roman policier where his inspector works in the police prefecture in Paris along with a set cast of other police inspectors. Like Carella, Maigret is married and readers catch a glimpses of his home life throughout the series.

Simenon also relied heavily on the procedures of the police routine for plotting, although Maigret usually capitalizes more on his intuition than on the dogged formal routine. Other similar police series include the Martin Beck novels created by the Swedish writing team of Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo, the Dutch novels featuring inspectors Grijpstra and de Gier written by Janwillem van de Wetering, and Nicolas Freeling's Henri Castang and Van der Valk series set in Holland and France.

Although McBain's series shares certain characteristics with these others, his is solidly American in setting and tone and style. McBain is one of the smoothest and economical writers working in the field of crime fiction, which is noted for its writers of economy and speed. No one is better at setting a scene with so few words nor of developing that scene using spare and evocative language of extraordinary power. He has developed a style perfectly suited to conveying the gritty and violent urban world of the 87th Precinct.

Related Titles

Fuzz falls in the middle of the 87th Precinct series. It is related to both the books that precede it and to the ones that follow. Reading this one example places the reader into the continuing narrative with its developing characters and themes. The 87th Precinct books form a long continuous story, the story of the individual police officers of the precinct and the story of the evolving urban environment in which they work and live. It is difficult to adequately summarize such a long and interconnected set of novels, both because of the riches of its narrative fabric and because it is still in the process of unfolding.

Other titles in the 87th Precinct series include Cop Hater, 1956; The Mugger, 1956; The Pusher, 1956; The Con Man, 1957; Killer's Choice, 1957; Killer's Payoff, 1958; Lady Killer, 1958; Killer's Wedge, 1959; 'Til Death, 1959; King's Ransom, 1959; Give the Boys a Great Big Hand, 1960; The Heckler, 1960; See Them Die, 1960; Lady, Lady, I Did It! 1961; Like Love, 1962; Ten Plus One, 1963; Ax, 1964; He Who Hesitates, 1965; Doll, 1965; Eighty Million Eyes, 1966; The 87th Precinct, 1966; Fuzz, 1968; Shotgun, 1969; Jigsaw, 1970; Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here, 1971; Sadie When She Died, 1972; Let's Hear It for the Deaf Man, 1972; 87th Precinct: An Ed McBain Omnibus, 1973; Hail to the Chief, 1973; Bread, 1974; Blood Relatives, 1975; The Second 87th Precinct Omnibus, 1975; So Long as You Both Shall Live, 1976; Long Time No See, 1977; Calypso, 1979; Ghosts, 1980; Heat, 1981; Ice, 1983; Lightning, 1984; Eight Black Horses, 1985; Another Part of the City, 1985; Poison, 1987; Tricks, 1987; Lullaby, 1989; Vespers, 1990; Widows, 1991; Kiss, 1992; and Mischief, 1993.

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