The Game of Thirty Short Guide

The Game of Thirty by William Kotzwinkle

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Characters

Jimmy McShane is the narrative consciousness of The Game of Thirty, relating the action as it occurs in a kind of continuous present tense that Kotzwinkle has often used skillfully in earlier books. Raised in the legendary tough district of New York's Hell's Kitchen, he and his best friend (now a "knight of the NYPD") grew up quickly in an ambience of gang rivalries, his father a devout Catholic "in it up to his ass with the Mob," his streetwise education conducted by Willy the Wire. McShane sensed intuitively that he was "born to solve mysteries," joining the Air Force where he worked as a security officer. He is an ex-smoker, exdrinker, formerly married, formerly affianced, now unattached but very attracted to Ann Henderson, as well as to Temple Rennseler, who has hired him to try to find out who murdered her father. He takes his work very seriously, constantly learning more about every aspect of the detective's methods and strategies, and he combines a formidable physical presence, which he maintains through regular workouts, with a keenly analytical understanding of the latest technology in surveillance equipment, computer data availability, police procedures and the flow of power on the streets of Manhattan. He sees himself as somewhat of a fanatic (and is proud of this trait), and he is also given to a poetic turn of phrase which reveals his sharply observant and contemplative nature. He is fiercely loyal, very persistent, generally laconic and only occasionally troubled by a sort of existential dread which he deals with by trying to "muddle through and speak the necessary words." He is a hard guy who means well, with an endearing streak of selfmockery and an inherent quality of decency. Since all of the other characters in the novel are seen through his eyes, it is crucial that Kotzwinkle make his perceptions seem accurate and his company a pleasure to experience.

Ann Henderson is the most fully formed, complex and continuously interesting of all the women characters Kotzwinkle has written about so far. She is a trained medical professional who has chosen chiropractic therapy as an alternative to more traditional medicine, and she has explored its implications by learning about many other less-conventional methods of treatment as part of a holistic view of human health. She inclines toward the future just as McShane inclines toward the historic, and their unofficial partnership is an effective and satisfying collaboration for both, a kind of echo of the famous Holmes/Watson duo, with Henderson more like the dauntingly analytical Holmes and McShane resembling the more stolid Watson, although they are both much too mercurial to be limited to one dominant trait. Like McShane, she operates on enthusiasm and high energy ("Sometimes I get into a frenzy," she remarks), joining a very practical, street-smart intelligence with an imaginative, open-minded interest in more esoteric endeavors, and her understanding of the natural world nicely complements McShane's urbanity. Her real affection for McShane contains the possibility of love, and her caution about their relationship is partly due to her proclaimed desire to protect her solitude, but more significantly her wish to make sure that they proceed together with each other's full attention. Henderson is repelled by McShane's application of violence when the situation requires it, and he is irritated by her theoretical sympathy for everyone, but these are issues they can effectively deal

with in the course of the narrative. Their eventual union at the conclusion is a reflection of their mutual understanding and an indication that their partnership has permitted them both to grow in satisfying ways.

The only other character of real consequence is Temple Rennseler, the daughter of the murdered man, who is presented through McShane's reactions and perceptions. He finds her very attractive — elegant, stylish, and athletic without pretense or the snobbism often engendered by privilege, with an impressive command of the antique trade. Henderson admires her artistic sensibility; Saul Feldman (one of Mc-Shane's old friends) sees her as "A fine person. Sensitive." And yet, McShane intuitively realizes that she is deeply troubled beyond the grief at her fa-ther's death. The mystery of her psychological distress parallels the mystery of the theft and murder and has its roots in the same greed-driven, egobloated actions of the criminals. In one of the most ingenious turns of the plot, Temple's dark side, an apparent doubling of personality, is revealed as another self which has been called into existence as a protector and avenger by an aspect of Temple's inner spirit. When the facts about Temple's shadow self are disclosed, the various hints that Kotzwinkle has placed about Tem-ple's anxiety that it was if "another person were wearing my body" are clarified and her entire psychological history illuminated. McShane's reluctant and gentle refusal of her sexual invitation, after the case is concluded but before Temple has recovered, suggests not only his fundamental decency but also his empathy for a condition perhaps not totally alien to him.

The remainder of the characters in The Game of Thirty are essentially vivid types, plausible and realistic but not developed in much depth. The criminals are seen at a distance, if at all — figures of lurking menace whose actions have very serious consequences. As in a film, it is the reaction to the criminals that emphasizes their destructive designs. Tommy Rennseler, the murder victim, is gradually revealed as an embodiment of evil as defined by his total disregard for any other human being's needs. The other disreputable and dislikable people are all depicted primarily in terms of a specific trait that underscores their selfishness. Set in contrast to them are a group of generally genial, affable individuals — many of whom are friends of McShane — whose amiability and eccentricity reflect their goodnatured strategies for dealing with an often chaotic, sometimes dangerous environment where they are constantly tested by a world both fascinating and disconcerting. A sort of self-mocking humor that does not dissolve their essential dignity gives them the perspective that prevents an absorption in the self. Significantly, they do not need a facade of respectability to cover their actual intentions, thus removing an area of psychological uncertainty that undermines a sound moral base, or in Temple's case, creates a monster of vengeance in the form of her "brother" Rex.

Social Concerns

Although William Kotzwinkle has generally maintained a division between the books which he has written with a mature audience in mind and those which he has designed for younger readers, he has observed that "only in recent times have we had a classification called 'children's books,' and it isn't a particularly good thing to have." His very popular novelization of the film E.T. (1982) was a book which he hoped would communicate to adults as much as to children "a powerful archetype that is dawning for humanity," and The Game of Thirty, while specifically directed toward an adult audience, links Kotzwinkle's concern with evil to his very strong feeling for what he calls "this fleeting thing, the child's mind."

In discussing the origins of The Exile (1987), Kotzwinkle commented that "Nazi Germany has infiltrated the psyche everywhere." The Game of Thirty follows this thought into the last decade of the twentieth century to demonstrate the terrible consequences of the most immoral actions on the life of a child — an aspect of humanity which he treasures. While the narrative structure of The Game of Thirty is built on a complicated murder mystery and is propelled by the investigation carried out by an admirable private detective named Jimmy McShane, the motive behind the murder is eventually revealed as a particularly ruthless example of self-gratification. Kotzwinkle uses the psychology of the criminals and their cohorts as a means of identifying and exploring some of the worst examples of moral corruption behind the manifestations of degradation he focuses on in American life. Using New York City both as a literal and emblematic arena for many unsettling expressions of contemporary social behavior, Kotzwinkle examines the world from the perspective of a man who has chosen to combat crime as much as matter of principle as a means of employment and self-gratification. Significantly, McShane's specialties are security systems and surveillance techniques. This concentrates the character on an endemic phobia about personal safety that permeates the postmodern world and involves McShane in the pervasive suspicion that fraudulent and deceptive social and commercial practices are at the center of many people's interactions and relationships. The connection between the murder mystery and the destruction of innocence provides a solid moral base for the novel and permits Kotzwinkle to examine the breakdown of civility that had made life in great urban centers an unpleasant and even terrifying experience.

Techniques

Without denying the importance of the ideas and the psychological processes which operate in a novel, Kotzwinkle has commented that "a novel must suppress that process in favor of action and feeling." His film experience has sharpened his skills with the construction of a traditional plot that advances briskly toward a conclusion, resolving the conflicts responsible for the tension driving the narrative. His lively dialogue, control of tone to capture a character's mood and poetic powers of description all contribute to a very readable book. What gives The Game of Thirty its singular flavor, however, is Kotzwinkle's employment of the conventions of the mystery/detec-tive genre, his use of the lore of ancient Egyptian civilization and his feeling for the ethos of New York city in the past and present to structure and inform the book.

One of the reasons for the appeal of the novel of detection is its presentation of a solvable mystery in a universe where nearly every question is answerable by a pursuer of truth. While acknowledging the absurdity of many features of the contemporary world, McShane is guided by some basic principles that place the reader in close touch with him and his quest for justice. The novel's structure is carefully ordered by the introduction of data, the collection of clues, the appearance of complications and diversions, the gradual progression toward understanding, the revelation of additional — often shocking — information, and a final illumination that explains everything (within reason) and sets a positive course for the future. Kotzwinkle ingeniously expands the field of detective work by making the faithful partner a woman who is "meticulous and observant," by updating the informant into a computer freak, by introducing all sorts of high-tech equipment and by musing on the "prison of data erected around everyone in the name of law enforcement." At the same time, he satisfies the requirements of the now almost classic formulas of the vintage detective novel by giving McShane a good friend in the NYPD, by showing almost in passing some of the lowlife "characters" who are his more conventional clients and by letting McShane avoid the threat of various assailants through guile and muscle.

Many detective novels depend on the author's knowledge or expertise in a particular field, and Kotzwinkle uses Egyptology as a source for the object of attention which precipitates the murder, and as a structuring device within the novel, as the "Game of Thirty" of the title offers "squares we land on (which) correspond to what's happening to us at the moment." The parallel between the events in the present and similar incidents from antique Egyptian culture lends a quality of universality to the narrative, while the flow of the inquiry across the Island of Manhattan anchors it in a definite locale and eventually makes the city itself not only a setting but almost a kind of character — its moods and its distinctive architecture affecting the psychology of the people as if the accumulated associations of a neighborhood exert a kind of historical pull on everyone.

Themes

One of the most basic aspects of the traditional novel is the manner in which the protagonist, who often represents specific values and virtues that a culture supports, grapples with forces which are assaulting the foundations of that culture. In The Game of Thirty, Kotzwinkle places Jimmy Mc-Shane — a man whose character has been formed by an earlier America — in the midst of the postmodern world, where his fundamental precepts and principles are tested and his adaptability becomes a crucial factor in his physical survival and the maintenance of his psychic stability. McShane is a man with considerable experience in the vagaries of human behavior, but the extremity of evil and the fragility of innocence that he encounters as he pursues a conscienceless killer, in response to the classic detective's obligation to unravel a mystery and set aright the moral imbalance, compel him to modify both his techniques and attitudes. Kotzwinkle uses McShane, a typical American hero of hard-boiled detective fiction, action films, and literature which envisions an admirable man of solitude, stoicism, and selfconfidence to call some very basic assumptions into question. McShane's quest for answers, and ultimately for justice, occurs in a shifting social matrix that enables Kotzwinkle to mingle the detective story with a continuing reflection of how a just man acts; how morality can be construed in the wake of a postmodern tendency toward philosophical indeterminacy.

In the course of his pursuit of the truth, McShane finds arrayed along a spectrum of self-absorption all of the characters in some way complicit in the web of criminality. From the wife of the murdered man, a woman who is a staggeringly self-centered person, to the murdered man's assistant, whose icy demeanor shuts out any sympathy for other people, by incremental degrees to the horrifying villainy of the greed-driven murdered man and his moral counterpart, a child molester, McShane's investigation carries him into close consideration of the psychology of evil. His own clear moral code has determined his reactions to the criminal activity he has encountered to this point in his life, but in trying to understand the actions of people whose behavior seems incomprehensible, Mc-Shane is called upon to recognize that his absolutist responses have limited his range as a man to some very effective but also somewhat programmatic channels. In addition, while McShane is clearly a "good" man, by reducing his maneuvers to intricately complex but still conventional methods, he may be guilty of the same narrowing of perspective that accounts for the utter solipsism of the criminals. And, as Kotzwinkle has explained in discussing The Exile, "Every one of us is a mixture of opposites, and its only through integration of the shadow aspect of our selves that we become aware of who we really are." The Jungian cast to this position is a part of the basic fascination of McShane's character as it evolves through the narrative, and it is the device that Kotzwinkle employs to introduce and explore the related subthemes of the novel. Kotzwinkle endorses and approves of McShane's traditional strengths but strongly suggests that an accommodation to the more esoteric modes of the 1990s can be beneficial.

Along these lines, Kotzwinkle includes several of the more central preoccupations of his work. Amidst the gritty, realistic depiction of life in the city, Kotzwinkle threads an

element of the mystical which recalls Paul Valery's claim that "the fantastic is another aspect of the realistic" and parallels Hamlet's admonition that "There are more things in heaven and earth" than Horatio's philosophy (that is, rational science) allows. The details of the Egyptology that inform the narrative and the seemingly uncanny connections between events in the past and incidents unfolding in the story are an aspect of this position. McShane is skeptical enough so that his growing awareness of a correspondence supports the author's assertions. Then, what might be called "New Age" medical thinking, which emphasizes the correlation between physical symptoms and mental well-being, is exhibited by several independent, self-composed woman characters who intrigue Mc-Shane. His unofficial partnership and evolving friendship with Dr. Ann Henderson, a chiropractor and practitioner of unusual but not ineffective healing arts such as aroma therapy, is the result of McShane's attraction for Henderson as well as his admiration for her abilities in areas that he has dismissed but is now beginning to acknowledge as valid. In order to become seriously involved with a "new" woman, McShane begins to realize that he might become a "newer" version of the man he has been — not in rejecting any of the skills or strengths which he is justly proud of, but in accepting some of the new ways of seeing that a contemporary feminine consciousness affords. The combination of attributes is necessary for McShane not only to thwart evil and preserve innocence, but to more fully understand evil so that he can assist in the recovery of a lost innocence by offering tenderness and understanding while realizing that this does not compromise his masculine power.

Key Questions

Kotzwinkle's claim that he emphasizes "action and feeling" in his novels is a key to his method of presentation. One might consider how much his work in the film industry has influenced him in this regard and identify the particularly "cinematic" elements in his work. His success with "chil-dren's literature" is an important indication of his vision of existence, and it has much to do with his use of nonrealistic elements. The place of the mystical and the fantastic in his work is an important part of his presentation of the world. His protagonists have generally been people who might be called "good natured zanies," men slightly out of step with prevailing modes of behavior but well-meaning, eccentrically intelligent, and singularly individual. Jimmy McShane is his first fullscale use of an action-hero, a step beyond David Caspian of The Exile, who was only operative in this mode in his fantasies and in the films he made. Does McShane retain the idiosyncratic originality of Horse Badorties in The Fan Man, or is he too similar to other standard men of force?

1. How is the game of "30" used to reinforce the moods of the narrative in The Game of Thirty?

2. Can one consider the setting in Manhattan a kind of "character" in the novel? How does the specific location that Kotzwinkle chooses for a particular incident contribute to the mood of the moment?

3. Are the villains too monstrous and one-dimensional to be taken seriously? Does Kotzwinkle's own anger interfere with his depiction?

4. How successful is Kotzwinkle in linking the mystery/detective genre to the emphasis he places on a child's innocence?

5. Does the almost formulaic violence reduce the novel to its generic tendencies?

6. Compare Jimmy McShane to other prominent figures in mystery and detective fiction.

7. Is the psychology of separate personalities adequately presented in terms of the character of Temple Rennseler?

Literary Precedents

When working with an established literary subgenre like the detective/ mystery novel, the conventions established by illustrious predecessors demand respect but not subservience. If an author understands the tradition he works in, invention as a form of respect and homage can be combined with self-reflexive commentary that may edge toward affectionate parody. The primary sources of Kotzwinkle's text are the so-called "hard-boiled" school of writers like Horace McCoy and Dashiell Hammett of the 1930s and writers like Raymond Chandler in the 1940s, augmented by the code-hero of Hemingway's best novels and short stories. They depicted a man who was capable of action when necessary, loyalty, personal integrity and self-sacri-fice, and who operated in a world becoming a moral vacuum. Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes and Watson are the archetypal pair Kotzwinkle uses as a ground for elaboration, and Kenneth Fearing's The Big Clock (1946) provides a basic scheme of an elaborate murder also set in New York.

Related Titles

The Came of Thirty is Kotzwinkle's first detection novel with a contemporary setting, but Fata Morgana (1977), followed a detective through a mystery in nineteenth-century Europe, and the "children's book" Trouble in Bugland: The Inspector Mantis Mysteries (1983) was a highly praised variation on the Holmes/Watson duo set in the insect world, with various characters corresponding to their appropriate entomological equivalents. Kotzwinkle has used the city of New York as an integral structural element in The Fan Man (1974) and in The Midnight Examiner (1989) prior to this novel, and Seduction in Berlin (1985) and The Exile (1987) both explored the nature of evil as a prelude to its central position in The Game of Thirty.

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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 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994