

God Save the Mark Short Guide

God Save the Mark by Donald E. Westlake

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Characters

Fred Fitch, the protagonist of *God Save the Mark*, is typical of the antiheroes who narrate Westlake's humorous fiction. Reclusive by nature, he has found an occupation — in his case, that of free-lance researcher — which requires the minimum of contact with others. As a consequence, his reactions to characters such as his late uncle's mistress, a stripper whose brassy exterior masks a heart with at least traces of gold, are much stronger and sharper than they would be if he were an experienced man of the world. The reader feels that Fitch is discovering new people rather than simply being introduced to them for the first time, and this adds a great deal of zest to his story.

In comparison to the exotic characters Westlake delights in inventing for his narrator's enlightenment, Fitch's persona is a *tabula rasa* when the plot gets underway. But as the pace of events quickens, Fitch is forced to define himself against the various extreme forms of behavior he encounters, and by the end of the book he has a good idea of the sort of person he wants to be. Readers see his character in the process of formation, and this both adds to their empathy with him and gives the book an element of moral choice one does not expect to find in a humorous thriller. Although Westlake does not write "novels of character" in the sense in which the psychological realist understands the phrase, he does deal with many of the same issues by constructing his characters from the ground up rather than introducing them at a given point in their development, and the results are often extremely affecting.

Social Concerns/Themes

It is all too easy to treat *God Save the Mark's* story of a tainted inheritance and its pursuit by a variety of greedy schemers as pure entertainment with no evident social concerns. The protagonist, Fred Fitch, is an introverted bachelor whose inability to avoid confidence tricksters is used as both a running gag and the explanation for his failures in human relationships. It is precisely Fitch's difficulties in distinguishing between deceivers and truth-tellers, however, that determines his — and since the book is narrated in the first person, also the reader's — perception of society: It is seen as an essentially unregulated confusion of conflicting claims, where appearances are seldom an accurate reflection of reality and the most surprising event is for someone to turn out to be exactly what they say they are.

Although Westlake's comic novels continually mitigate this somewhat dystopian vision with amusing incidents and a generally light touch, there is no doubt that he is offering a serious analysis of contemporary American society. In the series of books published as "Richard Stark," this is presented in a brutally direct and even shocking manner; in the titles Westlake writes under his own name, humor and whimsy soften his nonetheless bleak view of people's capacity for living together. In *God Save the Mark*, Fred Fitch can never be sure of the authenticity of those attempting to influence his behavior. The police, when they are not laughably incompetent, may well be in cahoots with the bad guys; respected social institutions turn out to be fronts for organized crime; and Fitch's relatives, when they deign to notice his existence at all, have only a mercenary interest in his well being.

Westlake does, however, offer a partial remedy for this general absence of social cohesion. The process of making friendships, of understanding, accepting and coming to love the peculiarities of a particular individual, does hold out the hope of establishing a meaningful relationship. In *God Save the Mark*, this occurs when Fitch comes to know and trust the girlfriend of the policeman assigned to his case, which leads him to put his life in her hands with gratifying results. Although superficial social relationships may not permit one to have faith in others, a commitment to mutual communication can result in the kind of interpersonal bonds that help to hold off the anarchy which is never far below the surface of Westlake's work.

Techniques

God Save the Mark is an excellent example of Westlake's adroitness with the first-person narrative. By restricting the reader's knowledge to that of the protagonist's, he builds suspense, increases the sense of identification with Fitch and keeps his authorial eye focused upon the significant events of the plot. The one major disadvantage of this approach is that Fitch has to actually encounter everyone and everything of importance in the book, and in less practiced hands this might seem unbearably manipulative; but as Westlake handles it, Fitch's increasingly frenetic activity is believably motivated by unfolding plot developments and never seems forced or based upon gratuitous coincidence. Westlake's skill at plotting is often commented upon by reviewers, and in God Save the Mark it can be observed at the service of a first-person mystery narrative fully worthy of the technique's HammettChandler origins.

Literary Precedents

The idea of a humorous thriller is to some extent a contradiction in terms, and there are few successful examples of the integration of comedy with suspense. Books such as Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* (1934) and Richard Powell's *Lay That Pistol Down* (1945) utilized highly stylized upper-class settings as a means of distancing the impact of violence upon their somewhat fey heroes, but this cannot be done for the sort of average-guy protagonist Westlake presents in novels such as *God Save the Mark*. Fred Fitch probably has more in common with characters such as Cervantes' Don Quixote and Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk*, who also bring invincible ignorance to their struggles with a world shot through with corruption and deceit. Basically, however, Westlake's humorous thrillers are not part of any well-established literary genre, this being attested to by both the surprised enthusiasm with which they were greeted and the fact that they have spawned no evident imitations.



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