

# The Golden Orange Short Guide

## The Golden Orange by Joseph Wambaugh

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# Characters

The major characters are Winnie Farlowe, an alcoholic policeman who retired early because of an injury sustained in chasing a burglar; Buster Wiles, a policeman who does not want to be killed; and Tess Binder, a rich woman who desires to be much richer.

Tess seduces Winnie and leads him to fall in love with her. She discourages him from giving up alcohol, the better to control him. Winnie tries to keep his wits about him, but until he hits bottom, he is totally in her control. Only when he sobers up can he realize what has been done to him.

Tess has no goals other than having a perfect body and the vast sums of money needed to clothe it perfectly.

She needs to be the envy of her friends, whose vocation is the acquisition of wealth, usually through marriage and generous divorce settlements. She comes close to falling in love with Winnie, but the intensity of her greed prevents her from entering fully into any other emotion.

Wambaugh's minor characters are well drawn and entertaining. Chip Simon is the perfect yuppie lawyer who imitates the actor Michael Douglas's hair style and his devotion to greed, as portrayed in the film *Wall Street*. Corky Peebles is an expert on assessing the net worth of everyone around her. The barflies who are Winnie's drinking companions provide more comic touches. They include Guppy Stover, who has never gotten over the fact that she was jilted in 1945; Bilge O'Toole, who races his turtle, Irma, against Regis, a turtle owned by Carlos Tuna; and Spoon, who owns the bar, Spoon's Landing, and plays the spoons as a musical instrument.

Winnie is the sympathetic character whom the reader wants to warn against the manipulations of Tess and his own self-destructive drinking. It is clear that he is in danger from both. Tess appears too compliant and eager to ply him with liquor. Clearly she is up to something. As it turns out, she means Winnie no real harm, but her need for money is much greater than her need for him.



## Social Concerns/Themes

The Golden Orange refers to Orange County, California, home of the very rich and the very weird. This area of California, including Newport Harbor, the Pacific coast, and Catalina Island, is magnificent, and many of its inhabitants are beautiful; but this paradise is fast being ruined by the greed of its multimillionaire businessmen and the women who set out to trap them for financial gain. Towns like Newport Beach are also polluted by drug addicts and other petty criminals.

Wambaugh is appalled by the gross materialism that has come to be identified with Orange County. Some of the funnier passages in the novel mock the Southern California yuppie lifestyle: grocery stores that sell white truffles at \$1,600 dollars a kilo, individually wrapped white eggplants, and elephant garlic in little white nets; the diesel Mercedes Benz as a despised automobile fit only for employees running errands; women over forty who maintain perfect bodies by means of plastic surgery and constant exercise; huge yachts that never leave Newport Harbor.

He also notes the difficulty of police work in an area where the rich cheat their insurance companies and criminals seem to have more rights than policemen. In such a society only the quixotic would insist on total honesty.



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Golden Orange seems to be an old-fashioned whodunit. Called upon to protect Tess from a dangerous killer, Winnie begins to suspect that her father's death was a homicide. Later on, another suspicious death occurs, and he holds himself responsible until he begins to suspect his closest friend.

Wambaugh withholds information about the relationship between Winnie's friend Buster and Tess in order to keep the reader, as well as Winnie, in suspense. We know that Winnie is really a good person, despite his unfortunate addiction to drink, and that Tess is not a good person, because of the many hints Wambaugh provides. Tess is a temptress and a dangerous woman; she does all she can to corrupt the naive hero. In this sense, she is a direct descendant of the seductresses created by late romantic British poets of the nineteenth century, such as Algernon Swinburne and Oscar Wilde.

Winnie would like to be the conventional hard-boiled detective in the tradition of Dashiell Hammett's tough and incorruptible operatives. He is also the heir of the wounded hero such as Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and his character can be traced to the Byronic hero of the early nineteenth century. Unlike earlier heroes, however, Winnie cannot drink with impunity, nor can he solve the mystery until he comes to terms with his alcoholism. American novels of the 1920s, particularly those by Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos often portrayed binges and hangovers, usually idealizing excessive drinking as the height of sophisticated behavior. Wambaugh, on the contrary, shows the destructive aspect of alcohol with devastating realism.

The social satire in the novel is reminiscent of that of nineteenth-century British novelists Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, and the British eighteenth-century poets Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. Swift and Pope were particularly incensed by women who attempted to improve their appearance through artificial means.



## Related Titles

The Golden Orange (1990), Wambaugh's novel after five years of not publishing, shares with his nonfiction works on crime the conviction that criminals have sociopathic personalities that are incurable. He reminds us of the viciousness of these criminals in a scene in which a tape of a tortured child's screams is played. The murderer made the tape for his own enjoyment.

The California setting is familiar from Wambaugh's previous works; The Golden Orange is not set in a slum or a ghetto, however, but in one of the wealthiest communities in America.

Life here is very different from English middle-class life portrayed in his work of nonfiction The Bleeding (1989), but it seems just as authentic.

Unlike Wambaugh's earlier books, The Golden Orange deals with the difficulties inherent in every person's life, not just those of police officers. In Wambaugh's late twentieth-century America, it is difficult just to get by, and almost impossible to survive honorably. Yet Wambaugh believes that a spark of decency still exists in even the most unlikely people.



# Copyright Information

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