Hollywood Husbands Short Guide

Hollywood Husbands by Jackie Collins

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Contents

Characters

Hollywood Husbands has the same stock characters of all Collins novels; only the names and circumstances have changed. This is not to denigrate the work; Collins knows what her readers like and expect, and she gives it to them. For instance, there is always the heroine whose physical description pretty closely approximates those in her other novels (and in many ways matches the sultry book jacket photographs of the author). Jade Johnson is "twenty-nine years old ... .

shoulder length shaggy copper hair, gold-flecked, widely spaced brown eyes, . . . full and luscious mouth, and a strong square jaw that saved her from being merely beautiful ... . five feet ten inches tall, one hundred and thirty pounds ... . very long legs, a lithe, supple body, broad shoulders, and an incredible swanlike neck . . . kindhearted and a good friend when the need arose, ... an acerbic wit and a wild sense of humor ... . smart, independent, ..." The distinction: She is "one of the highest-paid photographic and commercial models in the world."

Jack Python is described as "six feet tall with virile good looks. Thick black hair worn just a tad too long, penetrating green eyes, a two-day stubble on a deep suntan, and a hard body ... .

thirty-nine years old . . . [with] money, charisma, a certain kind of power, razor-sharp wit, and fame." The typical Collins hero.

The minor characters in a Collins novel are often the "little" people, the hangers-on, those trying to make it to the top or hold on to their precarious position there. Of course, there also is the powerful older man, in this case Zachery Klinger, who turns out to have some previously unknown but ultimately welcomed connection to one of the least suspected characters. Wes Money appears to be a nobody who is an opportunist. In a way he is. But he turns out to be one of the most moral of people, giving as much as he takes.

Mannon Cable and Howard Solomon, friends of Jack Python, are ambitious and self-centered with few truly admirable qualities. But they evolve into honorable men. Even Klinger, who is portrayed as generally ruthless toward everyone, shows a soft spot when he discovers he is the father of a teen-age daughter.

Collins always includes black characters in her stories, presented in a positive light. Aretha, Jack Python's personal assistant, is "black, weighed two hundred and twenty pounds, and everyone loved her ... . [she] had the most delightful sing song voice, and a smile to match . . . ," Eli, a waiter in a New York restaurant where Clarissa Browning worked in the 1970s, "was black, gay, and unfailingly cheerful . .

. . an actor, . . . dancer, and a singer."

He helped Clarissa get her waitressing job and shared his apartment with her.

It was mainly because he "wouldn't allow [Clarissa] to drift" that she eventually learned to act. "He insisted she accompany him to his singing classes and dancing lessons." He took her to his acting classes and "bombarded her with books" on drama and acting.

Beverly D'Amo, a model, is "black and exotically beautiful, her jet hair hanging in a thick braid past her waist, and cheekbones that could cut glass."

She is outspoken and her "language never had been ladylike." She has a "wild, high-pitched Eddie Murphy laugh." Outrageous and goodhearted, she is Jade's dependable friend, and in a plot twist, ends up living with billionaire Zachery Klinger and, to her own surprise, in love with him.

There are many characters with whom the nearly ten dominant characters interact, and Collins delineates them all with descriptive detail and dialogue that make them as interesting as those crucial to the basic plot.

Social Concerns

Collins by her own admission is mainly concerned in her writing with telling a good story. She sets out to get her readers totally engrossed in the doings of her characters and seems only peripherally interested in social issues, except as society dictates how people of a certain status "must" behave. Hollywood society is not typical of American society, at first glance. The lavish spending of money and the "la dolce vita" atmosphere seem applicable only to the American entertainment world.

But upon closer scrutiny, Hollywood, as portrayed by Collins, replicates American society. The sexual revolution begun in the 1960s continues in the 1980s to influence the behavior of the characters. Sexual freedom is a way of life among the males; the Collins females are also sexually liberated. When Jade Johnson and Jack Python have a dinner date, Jack tells her forthrightly "I want to sleep with you." She utters a couple of mild reservations about their other "commitments" — he is practically engaged to another woman; she is still emotionally involved with a former live-in lover.

But when he asks, "Do you want me as much as I want you?" she says, //vYes,' . . . before she could help herself."

Silver Anderson has a sexual liaison with a barman, Wes Money, after he rescues her in a gay bar. They go to bed together after she decides he is attractive and manly and available.

In 1986 Collins was certainly aware of the threat of AIDS. In fact, in her 1993 novel, American Star, she includes a disclaimer at the beginning saying that although for the era of the book the described sex practices were appropriate, she wished to "emphasize the importance of practicing safe sex" and using condoms. Jack Python comments that "only luck and a ... sixth sense" had kept him from contracting sexually-transmitted disease; in the 1980s "it was only prudent to be more careful." This concern about sexually transmitted disease is emphatically shown in the character Zachery Klinger, a billionaire widower. He has no compunctions about using call girls, but he insists that those who are procured for his pleasure must be "discreet and under thirty ... . And they should . . . have clean bills of health, dated today." He has no cavalier attitude about AIDS; he seems to know it could happen to him. But the other characters are more ostrichlike, assuming that AIDS is out there but probably not among their group.

Drugs, especially cocaine, are used by characters as a kind of "pick-meup." The character Howard Solomon, a studio head, uses it to help keep him calm in a profession that is "extremely precarious," where he wields power that "could be snatched away at any given moment." He uses cocaine, not because he needs it (he insists), twice a day, once in the morning "to get off on the right foot," and once in the evening "only if they [he and his wife] were going out or entertaining at home." He believed he was a "very conservative user," who would "never get hooked."

And of course he does, as apparently do most drug users, and his habit escalates to the point where he is snorting cocaine several times a day and becoming zombielike.

The effects of child and spousal abuse and neglect are revealed in a series of flashbacks to the 1970s. One character, anonymous until her identity is revealed on page 526, suffered horrible brutalities. She was raped by a stepfather, impregnated twice, the second time by a spineless boyfriend who deserts her, forced to give up the baby for adoption, beaten and raped by a drunken husband and his loutish buddies, befriended by a gay black man only to see him brutally killed.

The character retaliates each time with devastating, calculated arson — "Lighting the first match was easy . . ." By the time Collins identifies this character as a successful actress, the character's angry vengeful decision to try to obliterate all the Hollywood people against whom she had a grudge does not come as a surprise. The amoral, twisted person with no regard for human life and absolutely no compassion had been formed by an early life of lovelessness and mistreatment.

Techniques

Collins begins Hollywood Husbands with a bistro scene that gathers three "typical" Hollywood husbands in one place. (Actually, one, Jack Python, is an ex-husband, having had a brief marriage when twenty-five.) This movielike opening identifies at the outset who the important male characters will be. Through a series of sometimes paragraph-length scenes, rapid-fire episodes, and strategically placed flashbacks that successfully conceal the identity of a pivotal character, Collins moves the story along at a fast, engrossing pace. She leads the reader to her characteristic "big bang" ending: the party or gala where all significant characters are gathered in one place to face the music, so to speak.

Always assumed to be rontans a clef, Collins's novels have characters and plot lines resembling real life. She insists, however, that her characters are composites. The actors, studio heads and owners, agents, and others are described in sufficient detail to make the knowledgeable believe that they see certain real-life persons barely concealed there.

Generally speaking, a Jackie Collins book about Hollywood or the jet-set world follows her proven successful formula: two spectacularly good-looking people, male and female, go through various changes — other romantic liaisons, career obstacles, personal hang-ups — before coming together to live happily ever after. There must also be at least one character with a horrific past whose life will touch or be touched by one or both of the two main characters. Invariably this character will be psychotic or evil and intend to revenge himself or herself on one or both of the main characters or on someone else so close to them as to put them in jeopardy.

Themes

The lives of the rich and famous with their twists, turns, and little secrets are endlessly fascinating. Collins develops this theme in nearly all her books, and it has brought her tremendous financial success and popularity. Tabloids and television shows that probe the lives of the entertainment world's celebrities are enormously popular; Collins takes these kinds of people and incidents, fictionalizes them, and tells a gripping, convoluted story about them.

But there are also other themes, such as the moralistic "crime does not pay": Any characters who do dastardly deeds pay for them before the last page of the book. For example, Clarissa Browning got away with several murders in her youth. Granted, the victims were terrible people who did her great harm, but American morality and justice dictate that one cannot get away with murder.

Although she is never caught by the authorities and charged with any of her crimes, by the end of the book she comes to an untimely and punitive end (caused ironically or psychotically by herself): "an entire yacht filled with Hollywood celebrities had been blown sky-high ... . The tragedy was caused not by one fire but by a series of fires, set by a person or persons unknown . .

. . There had been five fatalities ... .

The fifth victim was being buried — Hollywood style ... . Clarissa Browning was certainly getting a star's sendoff."

Another theme Collins develops is that the good-hearted are always rewarded; the deserving always live happily ever after. A Cleveland Plain Dealer review describes it as "Happy outcomes and good guys getting to dish out lots of satisfying revenge before they live happily ever after . . ."

Collins's good characters are rarely difficult to spot. They are certainly not flawless, and they often have some sick habits. But when the chips are down, they rise to the occasion. Jack Python, Jade Johnson, and Wes Money are such characters, and they are immediately recognizable because all of them are selfless in dealing with, respectively, an errant niece, a gay brother, and a destitute "orphan." And although they all go through changes where their patience and good-heartedness are sorely tried, they remain true to their code of ethics and in the end all are rewarded: Jack and Jade come together in a true-love relationship; Wes, finally shed of the hang-ups of his past, has a chance for happiness and selfesteem in his marriage to Silver Anderson.

Key Questions

Collins's books are like home movies of Hollywoodites, showing them without makeup or flattering lighting. Yet because of their wealth and physical handsomeness, and certainly because of the excitement in their lives, her characters are often more fascinating and attracting than anything else.

While what happens to them is always the fun of reading a Collins novel, who it happens to and why they are caught up in such circumstances is a major triumph of her writing. Why are these people like they are? What circumstances in their lives have created their ambition and "unconventional" outlook? Reading more than one Collins novel will show how Collins invariably finds a "past" for her major characters that forms them into sometimes strange but always interesting creatures of the modern world. Thus, while plot is always the attraction, a Collins novel involves the reader in the personalities and ambitions of some quite attractive and fascinating characters.

1. Speculate about why most of Collins's main female characters (e.g., Jade Johnson) seem to fit the description of Jackie Collins herself. Is it an attempt to camouflage a real other personage, is it narcissism, is it an easy approach to characterization?

2. Outline her basic plot and apply it to other Collins novels. In what way does Collins deviate from the basic plot in Hollywood Husbands?

3. Do the attitudes of characters about AIDS and safe sex reflect the nationwide attitude? In what way? Is Collins trying to send a message to her readers to be more aware or is she simply catering to a trend?

4. Analyze the personality of Clarissa Browning and try to find hints that she suffered abuse in her youth that made her what she was. Is there a correlation between her early life and her propensity for casual sex and revenge by arson?

5. Speculate about the role of African Americans in Hollywood Husbands. Why are they usually "upright" and "loved" by the main characters? Does this signify a Hollywood attitude, a multicultural perspective, a traditional view or a peculiar affectation of Collins?

Literary Precedents

Hollywood Husbands might be considered a novel of incident, episodic in organization and loose in structure. It might also be considered a novel of manners, focusing as it does on the particular class mores of Hollywood.

Realistic, it is not particularly satiric, although some passages seem a bit tongue in cheek. A modern precedent is Harold Robbins's The Carpetbaggers.

Robbins is a favorite writer of Collins, and his novel has the same kind of insider look at Hollywood's rich and famous that Collins's work has. Other favorite writers of hers, Mickey Spillane and Grace Metalious, root into the underside of their characters' lives in the same exploratory way Collins has found works so well for her.

Related Titles

Hollywood Husbands takes the concept of Hollywood Wives, flip flops the main characters' gender and tells a new story. Some characters, Sadie La Salle and Buddy Hudson, from the earlier book are mentioned but play no part in the new book.

A third novel, Hollywood Kids, was written in 1994 to complete the saga of the Hollywood families. According to a Collins interview, "the thrust of Hollywood Kids is the real tragedy of celebrities' grown offspring."

Hollywood Wives Collins's characters in Hollywood Wives (1983) seem to be thinly disguised Hollywood celebrities, but Collins says that she has created originals from composites and imagination. As in several of her other novels, women in Hollywood Wives are mostly types: the young (or not-quite-young), beautiful, and basically good-hearted woman: Angel Hudson, Montana Gray, and Elaine Conti; the brassily beautiful, avaricious, ambitious "bitch" who will do anything to get what she wants: Gina Germaine, Karen Lancaster, and Shelly. Sadie LaSalle is shown first as a "bitch" but eventually reveals a "heart of gold" — sort of.

The Collins men are seldom noble; they all have a streak of ambition that makes them ruthless and conniving at times. The extreme in Hollywood Wives is the psychopath Deke Andrews, a viler version of Herbert Lincoln Jefferson in Sinners, (1984). He lurches through the story with an uncontrolled urge to destruction and violence. Ross Conti, a star on a career skid, and Oliver Easterne, a movie magnate, are users and have little to recommend them. The males who are most likable are the young protagonist Buddy Hudson, the homosexual hairdresser Koko, and the movie director Neil Gray, who although weak has a sympathetic quality. The Collins men are usually interesting and often funny. But it is the women who have the complexity to make them fascinating, funny, likable, and even admirable.

Hollywood Wives, said by some to portray "real" people, is a microcosm of American society in the 1970s and 1980s. It recreates the worlds of the up and coming, the arrived, and the hasbeens. Collins even shows a bit of a fringe subculture peopled by psychopaths who prey on celebrities for their own warped reasons. Many of characters are young strivers seeking success, fame, and money at any price. Collins portrays briefly the "predictable" effects of miscegenation among the middle class, in the marriage of Millie and Leon Rosemont. The ill-fated resolution of the relationship comes as no surprise, when black Millie leaves white Leon. More fully developed is the world of the Hollywood celebrity replete with a vivid and thorough delineation of sex, scandal, drugs and oneupmanship.

Overriding all these concerns is the subtle theme of the strong liberated woman. Three characters in particular provide differing images of the same notion: that women are strong, they can think, and they can succeed without a man's help. Angel Hudson, Montana Gray, and Gina Germaine each show a distinctive brand of strength.

Collins's popularity with women readers may lie in her talent for creating the sweet and innocent (Angel), the sexy and sleazy (Gina), and the aggressive and intelligent (Montana) women who stand up for what they want and need, controlling their lives and their men successfully.

A main theme then is that women can do anything, that they need and want no double standard. They can use money and power, so long the exclusive weapons of men, just as effectively as men do. Sexual independence is important to these women. They treat sex as men traditionally have, as an appetite to be satisfied as matter-offactly as the urge for a drink of water.

Their enjoyment of their sexual encounters does not produce any moral pronouncements or Victorian disapproval. Collins seems to believe that what is good for the gander is good for the goose.

The customs and cruelties of the show business/movie world spice the novel. The plight of wives in Hollywood, who spend the larger part of their lives trying to hold on to the reflected celebrity they have gained from their powerful husbands, is of primary concern in Hollywood Wives.

The Hollywood social scene depicted by Collins proves as fascinating to today's mass audience as the lives of rich and famous have always been.

Techniques Collins works without detailed plans, notes, and charts and claims she never knows what will happen next to her characters until about the last 100 pages. She uses flashbacks and short scenes in montages of fast-paced action to build suspense and delay the climactic moments so effectively that the reader is literally held in thrall. Book One of Hollywood Wives covers nearly 500 pages that build to Book Two, about fifty pages that resolve the conflicts of all the important characters. By the beginning of Book Two, Deke Andrews has finally found his longsought mother and his derangement has grown proportionate to the impediments met during his search. These last fifty pages clarify the subtle and obvious connections between most of the major characters and sort out the other plot complications.

Some of the characteristics of the regional novel are suggested in Hollywood Wives, with its emphasis on the customs and lifestyles of the inhabitants of Hollywood. The roman a clef is surely a form covertly incorporated in the work, although Collins is firm in denying that her characters are real people.

Hollywood Wives' intense study of the movie colony society is similar to John O'Hara's treatments of the Philadelphia/Pennsylvania social strata. Other predecessors with qualities in common with Collins's style, scope, and intent, are William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1847-1848) and Emile Zola's Nana (1880).

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