

The Horse You Came In On Short Guide

The Horse You Came In On by Martha Grimes

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Characters

Although *The Horse You Came In On* is set for the most part in America, many English characters from previous novels in the series appear in scenes before and after the trip to Baltimore taken by Jury, Plant, and Wiggins. A returning character with an important role is Ellen Taylor from *The Old Silent* (1989), a Baltimore writer in whom Plant is romantically interested. Ellen is an award-winning novelist through whose character Grimes parodies modern novels and the writing process; murder victim Beverly Brown, discoverer of what is possibly an unknown Poe story, was one of Taylor's students at Johns Hopkins.

As she does in all her novels, Grimes includes a spirited, independent, and intelligent child among her characters.

Jip, age twelve, is a orphan whose aunt owns an antique shop. In this shop Beverly Brown had bought a trunk and found there the Poe manuscript. Other memorable minor characters include the homeless characters and Hughie, the cab driver who takes Melrose Plant on a tour of Baltimore while dispensing largely inaccurate information about the city.



Social Concerns

The major social concerns are those of the previous novels in the series, justice and responsibility for others, particularly children. These concerns unite early in the novel when Lady Cray, a character from the previous novel, *The Old Contemptibles* (1991) asks Jury to look into the death of the nephew of a friend; the friend dies in the Tate Gallery in the novel's opening pages, and Lady Cray believes the death was largely caused by the woman's grief over her nephew's death. There being no living relatives, Lady Cray takes on responsibility for solving the nephew's murder and hires Jury to go to Philadelphia during his vacation.

Homeless characters in Baltimore are important in the novel's plot and reflect Grimes's social awareness. Milos, the character in the opening scene, is blind and almost completely deaf but is far from helpless. Grimes presents the homeless characters sympathetically but not condescendingly and shows understanding for the rules by which they live, which although unconventional are considerate of others' rights and property.

Social class also arises as one of Grimes's social concerns, more prominent here than in any novel but *Jerusalem Inn* (1984). Plant's rejection of his own title is mentioned in each novel, and frequently Americans are characterized as being more impressed with British titles than are the British. The title involved in the plot of this novel is Baron Baltimore, an Irish title and therefore unaccompanied by money or land. The title does, however, figure as a murder motive.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Literary works are important in the novel's plot, so Grimes intersperses passages from two works throughout her novel. The most important one is the short story "Violette," which according to the manuscript discovered by Beverly Brown, is by Poe. The story, not yet authenticated, is read aloud by the main characters in brief sections because Ellen Taylor, who has both the manuscript and Beverly Brown's typescript, is reluctant to carry around much of it at a time.

The idea of possible literary theft is reinforced by the second work, Ellen Taylor's novel-in-progress *Doors*, a sequel to her acclaimed novel *Windows*.

She is convinced that another writer named Vittoria Delia Salvina (whose real name is Vicki Salva) has stolen her plot and characters. Ellen continues to work on *Doors*, going to unusual, humorous, and ultimately dangerous lengths to force herself to write. Her knowledge of the writing process is helpful in solving the Poe manuscript mystery.

Grimes has a lengthier denouement than she usually does; the novel ends almost fifty pages after the murderer is uncovered. In fact, Grimes devotes so much attention to the development of her characters that detection is almost a secondary concern. Because all the detective characters are on vacation, detection is less important to them than in previous novels, and they manage to stumble accidentally upon clues while pursuing other interests.

The Horse You Came In On shares its precedents with the previous eleven novels in the series. Like *The Old Contemptibles*, this novel has earlier literature as an important part of its plot and setting, in this case involving Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is often considered to be the father of detective fiction because of short stories such as "The Purloined Letter" (1844), to which Grimes alludes.

References are also made to the PreRaphaelites, a group of nineteenth-century artists and writers, and to one of their heroes, Thomas Chatterton, a teenager who perpetrated a famous literary hoax in the 1760s. The reference is a foreshadowing of the issue of the authenticity of a newly-discovered Poe manuscript in the novel.

Themes

The usual Grimes themes are present here, with changes of emphasis in part related to the American setting. In this novel she emphasizes the theme that title and social position are unrelated to character. This theme is illustrated by the Baron Baltimore mystery and a parallel, comic subplot in which the working-class, hypochondriac detective Wiggins discovers that he himself may be a baron. This theme is part of a larger one contrasting appearance and reality, a theme which is of vital importance in detective fiction but which is here meaningful in itself rather than merely serving as a plot device.

The importance of the past is a common Grimes theme, and in this novel important clues lie in the distant past.

Jury's own past, he realizes when he goes to visit Jenny Kennington in Stratford-upon-Avon, has continued to cause him problems, particularly in his relationships with women. When he tells Jenny for the first time about his mother's death, her insightful response is to ask him if he has often since then "pulled women from burning buildings." Throughout the novel, the past is seen as important not merely in providing clues but in explaining characters and their actions.



Key Questions

1. Does the American setting make the novel more or less interesting than her English-based novels? Why do you suppose Grimes decided to set this novel in America?
2. Is there too little emphasis on detection in this novel?
3. Grimes writes a story alleged to be by Poe; does she do a convincing job of imitating Poe?
4. A number of ongoing situations, such as Vivian's long-delayed wedding, continue in this novel. Should Grimes resolve some of these situations, or do they remain interesting?
5. In the excerpts from Ellen Taylor's novel, Grimes parodies much of modern fiction. What are some of the elements of Ellen's writing that Grimes finds ridiculous?
6. What are some of the differences that emerge between American and English detectives?
7. Jip, the child character, has a past which is somewhat of a mystery even to herself. What function does such a mysterious past play?
8. How does the American bar (including its patrons) differ from its English equivalents?

Related Titles

This novel is the twelfth in the Richard Jury series. It is unique in being set in America; in the other Jury novels Grimes frequently shows her major characters as being outsiders in some way as they travel to various parts of England, and in this novel as in some of the earlier ones, a good deal of humor results from the characters' unfamiliarity with the place and from the encounters they have with colorful locals.

This novel also has close ties to many other novels in the series and particularly to its immediate predecessor, *The Old Contemptibles*. Grimes has a character note the passage of time, about a year, between the action of the two novels, and the return of Lady Cray brings with it news of the characters of the previous novel. Jury is still grieving over the death of Jane and discovers that Jenny was responsible for hiring the excellent and expensive barrister who counseled him in *The Old Contemptibles*; the identity of Jury's benefactor remained a mystery at the end of that novel.



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