

Hotel Paradise Short Guide

Hotel Paradise by Martha Grimes

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Overview

Hotel Paradise, following up on Grimes's earlier *The End of the Pier* (1992), represents the author's second foray into serious, "literary" fiction, an intentional, self-conscious movement away from the tried-and-true conventions of the traditional mystery novel. Nonetheless, a possible murder does lie at the core of the plot and prompts the investigations of the book's first-person narrator, twelve-year-old Emma Graham (who remains unnamed until near the novel's end). Plucky and precocious Emma, whose harried, distant mother presides over a down-at-the-heels restaurant and hotel in the small town of LaPorte, learns of the mysterious drowning death, some forty years before, of young Mary-Evelyn Devereau.

Mary-Evelyn had lived with three elderly aunts and had apparently dressed herself in her fanciest party frock late one night and cast off in a rowboat for a puzzling and ultimately fatal voyage on nearby Spirit Lake. During the course of Emma's investigation, a second, apparently related murder occurs, enticing her to redouble her efforts to unravel the mysteries surrounding the Devereau family. Emma is aided in her quest by a variety of quirky, eccentric characters who, like her (and like Mary-Evelyn before her), have been largely ignored or shunted aside by the community around them. Her search for answers culminates in a chilling nocturnal confrontation in the old Devereau house between Emma and a seemingly threatening figure from LaPorte's murky and distinctly tainted past.

About the Author

Martha Grimes was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but spent summers at her mother's hotel in western Maryland, obsessing, like the narrator of *Hotel Paradise*, over local theatricals and her mother's cooking. After earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Maryland, she found a publisher—Little, Brown—for the unsolicited typescript of her first novel, *The Man with a Load of Mischief* (1981), initiating a long string of classic British mystery novels, most of which feature Scotland Yard detective Richard Jury and his aristocratic friend Melrose Plant.

While she writes in the tradition of such English writers as Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Agatha Christie, Grimes remains thoroughly American although she does take frequent trips to England to conduct research for her novels. Grimes's reputation was cemented by her 1987 novel *The Five Bells and Bladebone*, which takes its title, as with nearly all of her works, from the name of a British pub. That book, like the next two (*The Old Silent* and *The Old Contemptibles*), landed itself securely on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was widely admired by critics and general audiences alike. Among the best of her earlier novels are *The Anodyne Necklace*, which won the 1983 Nero Wolfe Award for best mystery of the year, and *The Dirty Duck* (1984). Grimes, who has one son, teaches writing at Maryland's Montgomery College and Johns Hopkins University. She lives in Washington, D.C., and Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Setting

Grimes does not specify a precise geographical location for the fictional town of LaPorte; it may exist somewhere in New England (as her earlier novel, *The End of the Pier*, also set in LaPorte, suggests), or the town may mirror the western Maryland community of the author's childhood (as she has hinted in her own commentary on the novel). Similarly, the exact time frame of the action remains ambiguous, although references to the popular culture of the day indicate one pivotal summer in the early 1950's. In any event, this vagueness serves the author's intent to universalize the novel's setting, essentially making LaPorte a quintessential American small town of any time and any place. If LaPorte, for example, strikes the reader as a narrow, provincial, and mean-spirited place, Grimes may well be applying that perspective to small town life in general. Like Emma's fascination with a girl forty years dead, then, the town finally resides in a fictional realm outside of the normal limitations of time and space.

Although the exact locale of LaPorte remains unsettled, it is certain that its atmosphere, at least from young Emma's point of view, is at once dreamlike, sleepy, secretive, and more than a little sinister. But it is also a place of personal growth and instruction, as Emma, by grappling with the questions that haunt her, begins her own courageous journey toward enhanced maturity and independence.



Social Sensitivity

Nothing in *Hotel Paradise* is calculated to offend the sensibilities of socially-conscious readers. In fact, several social groups which are often treated dismissively, condescendingly, or stereotypically in others works—the young, the elderly, the mentally disabled—are presented with real sympathy and respect in this novel. As narrator, Emma is consistently resistant to thinking ill of others—except for her antagonist Ree-Jane Davidow, the waspish daughter of her mother's business partner. "It's very easy to find reasons to hate someone," Emma observes; "all you needed was the will to do it." Although she is imbued with a keen sense of injustice—especially toward those who neglect or mistreat children—Emma herself tries hard not to hate others and is nearly always successful.



Literary Qualities

Readers attracted to *Hotel Paradise* by Grimes's established reputation as an author of first-rate mysteries may come away disappointed; again, the solution to the novel's most conspicuous murder is only secondary to the author's intentions in this book. Moreover, while many critics praise Grimes's penchant for extended digressions, other readers may find the book's plot development unnecessarily sluggish, encumbered by a host of superfluous characters and languorous, dead-end divergences.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that Grimes has sought in *Hotel Paradise* to produce a serious work of literary art and to say things which are universally and permanently true about the human situation. It is clear, as well, that the author is in control of her materials and is aware of the literary, psychological, and mythic heritage within which she operates.

For example, *Hotel Paradise* in some ways recalls the tradition of the medieval English morality plays, particularly the famous *Everyman* (c. 1509-19), where the central character travels from house to house, from friend to friend, in search of spiritual understanding and salvation. In a parallel way, Emma Graham treads the streets of LaPorte and takes endless train and taxi rides to nearby Cold Flat Junction, seeking help from anyone who may remember details about Mary-Evelyn's life and death. By engaging these people in conversation, Emma moves ever closer both to Mary-Evelyn, as well as to personal revelations about her own character and place in the world.

Even more important as a structuring device within the novel is Grimes's use of myth, especially the universal myth of the questing hero. In myth and in literature based on mythic formulas, such heroes, alienated from their homes and communities, strike out on journeys of adventure and self-fulfillment. Along the way, they must overcome significant obstacles—both internal and external—and are typically assisted by various helpers, often termed, if female, "earth mothers" and, if male, "wise old men." In this sense, such minor characters as the nurturing Maud Chadwick, a middle-aged waitress in a fly-specked LaPorte diner, serves as one such "earth mother" for Emma; so, too, does the tarot carddealing Mrs. Louderback. Perhaps comically, the novel's chief "wise old men" include two mentally deficient and largely mute brothers, "Ubub" and "Ulub" Wood; the sedentary, bench-sitting Mr. Root; as well as the town sheriff, Sam DeGheyn, on whom Emma lavishes the adoring attentions of a schoolgirl crush. Each of these characters, in his or her own way, acts as a surrogate parental figure for Emma and assists her in her mythic quest to solve the Devereau family mystery.

Further, the novel is elevated above usual mystery /detective story fare by its conscious embracing of ambiguity. The uncertainty of the novel's setting, discussed above, provides an appropriate backdrop for Emma's occasionally unreliable narration of a story which itself involves events only imperfectly understood. For example, the final moments of Mary-Evelyn's life are recounted in an almost pre-verbal manner by the addled "Ulub," as interpreted in turn by Mr. Root and Emma. The resulting gap between words and reality may be considerable; indeed, an imaginative reader might plausibly



reconstruct the described scenario in quite a different manner from the way Emma does. And while the solution to the second murder seems clear enough, even here competing interpretations are available to the audience. By avoiding the clearcut answers supplied by the conventional "whodunnit," Grimes makes the point that real life itself is often a shifty, unsure matter, susceptible to a variety of possible perspectives and resistant to pat, formulaic verdicts. As Emma herself puts it, I wonder now if there are mysteries never meant to be solved. Or not meant to be solved to a certainty. . . . However much I want to believe that the story has a neat ending, I guess it doesn't.

Finally, in terms of her literary style, Grimes can be especially praised for her descriptive powers. The novel's descriptive passages—often long and always dense with specific, purposeful detail—chiefly center around particular depictions of nature and of food (Emma is constantly hungry) and serve as instructive models for aspiring writers.



Themes and Characters

While many of the usual trappings of a classic mystery are here—two violent deaths, an intrepid (if youthful) sleuth, and an eerie, menacing setting—Hotel Paradise is more distinctly a "coming of age" story than it is a true mystery novel. Throughout the book, twelve-year-old Emma is called upon to make a series of moral choices which hastens her necessary initiation into young adulthood. True, given her age, Emma is already precociously bright and frequently insightful; nonetheless, the reader needs to be aware that her pre-adolescent view of reality may, from time to time, be skewed and unreliable. For instance, she seems never to have traveled more than a hundred miles from LaPorte, resulting in a provinciality and naivete that often betray her. In order to come to terms with the mysterious death 222 Hotel Paradise of Mary-Evelyn Devereau, Emma must finally become a more dependable, less innocent interpreter of events than she is at the novel's beginning.

Indeed, in a brief but crucial passage, Mrs. Louderback, a local woman who dabbles in fortune telling, deals Emma pointedly revealing cards from a tarot deck. One of these cards, the "Hanged Man," signifies that Emma must undergo a mythic "rebirth" into a more mature perspective, achieving what Mrs. Louderback calls a "state of greater clarity." Late in the book, the accomplishment of this rebirth is suggested by Emma's journey through "the dark and tunnelike path" which leads to the decaying Devereau house—a journey which, Emma herself confesses, she could not have undertaken earlier in this summer of personal growth.

Another card features bedraggled children laboring through a snowstorm and is interpreted as meaning that Emma will face many obstacles in the course of her quest, but that her native resolution will ultimately see her through. However, this card speaks to another theme of the book, as well—the relationship between parent and child. It is clear, for example, that Emma identifies with the tattered, struggling children depicted on the card, realizing on some level that, like them, she, too, has been largely neglected and ignored at home. The fact that Emma remains nameless until the novel's end—until, in a sense, she has earned her name—may reflect her near-anonymity and virtual invisibility within the family setting. In a similar way, she also identifies with Mary-Evelyn Devereau, another twelve-year-old girl who had been rejected by those who were supposed to love her. Having a dead father, an emotionally remote older brother, and an overworked, distracted mother, Emma sees herself as occupying Mary-Evelyn's unenviable role of "scapegoat," the uncherished family figure toward whom unmerited blame is consistently directed. These are the powerful feelings which fuel her determined quest to answer the riddles surrounding the death of the long-dead girl with whom she oddly shares so much.

Topics for Discussion

1. Toward the end of the novel, Emma determines to return to the Devereau house by herself; "What was in my mind," she says, "was a hazy notion that this time I should go alone." Psychologically and symbolically, why is it important that Emma undertake this potentially dangerous journey without a companion?
2. Emma rarely complains overtly about her lot in life. But when she observes a dress in Mary-Evelyn's closet, she notes that "It was the kind of dress I might have had if anyone had ever bothered about my clothes." What does this comment—and the host of similar ones in the novel—tell us about Emma's status within her family?
3. Since the days of Plato, unity—the idea that each part of a literary work should be related to every other part—has most often been considered a virtue in writing. Does *Hotel Paradise* seem to you to be a unified work, or do some of its parts strike you as irrelevant or superfluous to the intentions of the novel as a whole? In this light, consider, for example, references to such minor characters as Miss Flagler, Miss Flyte, Miss Bertha, Lola and Ree-Jane Davidow, Helene Baum, Bunny Caruso, the anonymous and long-vanished hotel waitresses, and the participants in the community theatrical troupe. Do these characters— and Emma's thoughts about and interactions with them—contribute anything to the central themes of *Hotel Paradise*?
4. From the information Grimes provides, what is your understanding of MaryEvelyn's death? Offer your own account or interpretation of what exactly happened to her, making specific references to the text of the novel. Do you wish that Grimes herself had given you a less ambiguous solution to that mystery? Why or why not?
5. In the course of her investigation, Emma uncovers many facts that are potentially relevant to both murders. What, then, do you make of her consistent reluctance to share that information with adult authority figures, especially Sheriff DeGheyn?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare and/or contrast Hotel Paradise with either Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Olive Burns' *Cold Sassy Tree* (1984), or J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951)—books which may arguably be seen as influencing Grimes in this novel.
2. Trace and describe, over the course of the novel, Emma Graham's gradual, growing awareness of her kinship with Mary-Evelyn Devereau. Specifically, what life situations and character traits does Emma discover that she shares with the dead girl? What effect do such discoveries have on Emma and the decisions she makes?
3. Critics often commend Grimes for her dry, acerbic wit; one critic even calls her "the funniest of all mystery writers."

Discuss Grimes's use of humor in *Hotel Paradise*. Does that humor tend to grow out of situations or out of the characters themselves?

4. All of Grimes's novels seem to be filled with an assortment of colorful, eccentric characters. Discuss a number of minor characters in *Hotel Paradise*, emphasizing their respective identifying quirks, weaknesses, and mannerisms.
5. Research the characteristics of the classic mystery novel. Which elements of such novels can be found in *Hotel Paradise*? Which elements are missing? Why?

What issues seem to be more important to Grimes than remaining true to a certain established tradition of writing?

6. Pretend that you are Sheriff Sam DeGheyn. Prepare a clear, succinct, and straightforward account of the novel's two murders, presenting your own views as to what happened and the identity of the murderers. Assume that you have the facts that Emma discovered available to you.



For Further Reference

Grimes, Martha. In *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 117. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. A brief entry with biographical and bibliographical information.

Review of *Hotel Paradise*. *Kirkus Reviews* (March 1, 1996). A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* claims "The originality here—the convention of a radically disempowered detective set against a densely imagined but indifferent world—will remind some readers of Barbara Vine, others of the Henry James of *In the Cage* and *The Awkward Age*."

Review of *Hotel Paradise*. *Publishers Weekly* (May, 1996). A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* calls *Hotel Paradise* a "provocative study of lonely people and a delightful read. The suspense is value-added."

Melton, Emily. Review of *Hotel Paradise*.

Booklist (March 15, 1996). Calling the book "an enchanting read" and "one of the year's best," Melton praises the character of Emma as she investigates Mary-Evelyn's death.

Related Titles

Again, *Hotel Paradise* shares a LaPorte setting with Grimes's *The End of the Pier* (1992), a novel involving a serial killer and centering its attention on Sheriff Sam DeGheyn and waitress Maud Chadwick, both of whom turn up playing fairly minor roles in *Hotel Paradise*. Another similarity between the two works is the overarching theme of family relationships and an emphasis on a close study of character.

Of Grimes's many other mysteries, two have been especially recommended for younger audiences. The first, *The Horse You Came in On* (1992), brings Richard Jury and Melrose Plant to America to solve three apparently unrelated murders. The second, *Biting the Moon* (1999), features a teen-age girl who calls herself Andi; this novel highlights Grimes's growing commitment to the cause of animal rights.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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