

In the Last Analysis Short Guide

In the Last Analysis by Carolyn Gold Heilbrun

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Characters

The two consistent characters in the Amanda Cross mysteries are Kate Fansler and Reed Amhearst, who are first friends, then lovers, and, by the end of the third novel, *Poetic Justice* (1970), married. Kate is an extremely independent woman who has been trained in old-fashioned grace and manners, yet who drinks martinis and has a series of lovers, albeit discreetly. She is the youngest child and only daughter of a wealthy family, who has rejected her older brothers' Wall Street values to pursue an academic career, though a family inheritance supplements her faculty salary. Like her creator, Carolyn Heilbrun, Kate lives and teaches in New York City; unlike Heilbrun, she is determinedly childless, and does not marry Reed until she is nearly forty. As befits an English professor, Kate is well-spoken and witty, and her conversation is peppered with literary references and quotations. She is extremely loyal to both friends and ideals, and is always eager for adventure, especially when it involves a mysterious death or disappearance.

Reed Amhearst is, in *In the Last Analysis*, an Assistant District Attorney, though in later novels he becomes a professor in a law school and ultimately an international consultant on police ethics. A bachelor in this first novel, Reed is as urbane as Kate. His role in this mystery is as Kate's legal assistant, providing information and consulting a variety of experts on matters affecting the investigation.

Kate solves the mystery here, with Reed's valuable help; in some of the later novels, such as *The James Joyce Murder* (1967) and *Poetic Justice* (1970), Reed actually solves the puzzle, but the initial involvement is Kate's and she remains the central character.

Emanuel Bauer, the psychiatrist accused of murder, avoids being the stereotype of the Fifth Avenue analyst; although he is clearly intended to represent this kind of psychiatrist, Kate perceives him as a friend with a complex personality. The same is true of his wife, Nicola, who is an intelligent, supportive wife.

Aside from the murderer, the other significant character is Kate's soon-to-be nephew by marriage, Jerry, a twenty-two-year-old whom she hires to carry out part of her investigation. Despite her antipathy toward her older brothers, Kate is fond of several of her nieces and nephews, and her niece Leighton plays a part in both *Death in a Tenured Position* (1981; see separate entry) and *No Word From Winifred* (1986; see separate entry).

With few exceptions, the characters in all the Amanda Cross novels are well-educated, upper-middle-class, sophisticated people who enjoy conversation, are discriminating about food and drink, and travel widely. Their education and the intellectual level at which their conversations are conducted lift them from the category of mere stereotypes, although they do represent clearly identifiable social, political, and philosophical positions.

Social Concerns

The major social issue in Amanda Cross's novel, *In the Last Analysis*, is professional ethics, in particular the integrity of the medical profession—including psychiatry—and the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship. One of Kate Fansler's students has asked her to recommend a psychiatrist, and is later found murdered on the couch of the man Kate has recommended— Kate's close friend and former lover. As Kate becomes involved in proving her psychiatrist friend's innocence of the crime, the turns of the plot present in some detail the ethical and personal requirements for the honorable practice of medicine.

The practice of law is subjected to similar though more limited scrutiny when Kate requests the assistance of her friend Reed Amhearst, who works in the District Attorney's office. By providing Kate with information from the police investigation of the murder, Reed is technically violating the public trust, but in the context of Kate's attempt to exonerate an innocent man, Reed's actions are, in typical mystery-story fashion, viewed as part of a higher moral order and therefore justified.

Another issue, in this as in all of the Amanda Cross mysteries, is the conflict between police methods of criminal investigation and those of the amateur detective, who solves crimes with a mixture of serendipitous discovery and imaginative deduction. Like many of her fictional predecessors, Kate Fansler is usually drawn into investigations by friendship with the deceased or the accused; thus her's is the point of view of the insider who is attuned to nuances of personality and motivation, in contrast to the coldly methodical approach of a police investigation. Police detectives are not presented as cruel or unfeeling, but the values of the individual are clearly preferable to the values of the institution.



Techniques

The plotting of *In the Last Analysis* more closely resembles that of the traditional amateur-detective mystery than do any others in the Amanda Cross series.

That is, Kate's awareness that a murder has occurred and a good friend implicated begins in the first chapter, and all of her subsequent energies are bent on discovering the actual killer by following leads, seeking information, and finally arriving at a theory that proves to be correct. In the process, Kate virtually ignores her job as a college professor, whereas the usual setting of subsequent mysteries is within the academic world itself. In this first novel, Reed serves as a somewhat protective foil to Kate, constantly urging her to be cautious in taking investigative risks; and her disregard of his warnings casts into high relief Kate's spirit and sense of independence and also provides a kind of sexual tension that becomes more overt as the series continues.

One of the most significant techniques used in *In the Last Analysis*, as well as in the subsequent novels, is the level of intellectuality on which the characters encounter one another. The central characters discuss psychoanalysis, evaluate Freud's contributions to the study of the human mind, and quote from Edna St.

Vincent Millay and George Eliot, among others. Such conversation both underscores Kate Fansler's ability to apply a rich intellectual background to the solving of a crime and provides the novel with a sophisticated tone that puts it squarely within the Conan Doyle, S. S. Van Dine, Edmund Cuisein, and Nicholas Blake, whose detectives are erudite and highly literate.

Themes

The major themes of *In the Last Analysis* are human loyalty and integrity. Not only does Kate Fansler risk her reputation and hence her career in order to prove her friend Emanuel's innocence, but others in the novel demonstrate the same level of commitment to other people. Reed Amhearst owes Kate a favor, which he repays richly with his assistance in this case. The real Michael Barrister provided financial support for years to an elderly woman who had cared for his grandparents. Kate, Reed, and the accused Emanuel Bauer and his wife, Nicola, are all presented as people who adhere to principles of honesty and decency. On the other hand, the man who pretends to be Michael Barrister kills the one person who could challenge his identity. At the level, then, of both characterization and plot, Heilbrun draws a sharp contrast between the principled and the unprincipled.



Key Questions

Each profession has its own code of ethics to which its members adhere, or at least give lip service. Law and medicine have codes of professional ethics which include tenants of client-practitioner privilege. This novel discusses the role of analysis and the ethics between doctor and patient. It also explores the issues of ethical or moral conduct in daily human existence.

1. There have been many changes and advances in the medical arena. These changes have caused the profession to reexamine itself and its relationship to patients. The use of certain "new" or "radical" types of therapy, coupled with unscrupulous practitioners have caused the public to wonder about the ethical behavior of doctors. Exactly what is the author's view of the field?

2. Attorney-client and doctor-client ethics have changed over the past half century. In the past a patient had a tendency to follow "doctor's orders" without question. Do you feel professional ethics have changed? Are doctor's more ethical or less? Does "ethical behavior" really change or is it like truth, a constant?

One sometimes sees attorneys and doctors on television discussing other people's clients, how has television reporting and media coverage changed or altered what is being done by "professionals"?

3. Are there still "honest people" and how do you now define that phrase?

4. Show how the author contrasts the principled and unprincipled characters. Is it always a matter of black and white or are there shades of gray?

5. How ethical is it for Kate to ignore her job as a college professor in order to solve "the case"?

6. Why do you feel Kate thinks longingly of Peter Wimsey? Carolyn Heilbrun has stated that she feels women like Wimsey because of his feminine characteristics, do you feel that is accurate?

7. Why is Kate better suited to solve the mystery than the "professional" police?

8. The title of the book is in itself a play on words. What is the Last Analysis?

9. What counterpoint does Reed serve to Kate?

10. What are Kate's attitudes toward the policemen, toward Freud, and toward men in general?

Literary Precedents

Kate Fansler is an amateur detective in the British tradition of Sherlock Holmes and Lord Peter Wimsey, rather than the "hard-boiled" American tradition of Sam Spade. In fact, when talking to Captain Stern, a New York police detective, in the first chapter of *In the Last Analysis*, Kate thinks "longingly" of Lord Peter Wimsey, who, unlike Captain Stern, would have been able to discuss the British novel with her. This preference for the British model is consistent with the fact that Kate teaches English literature, as does the author of the novel.



Related Titles

Although the eleven Amanda Cross mysteries are not sequels to each other, Kate Fansler is the central character in each novel, and the books are further linked by similarities in setting, by style, and by the author's response to changes in American culture. After *In the Last Analysis*, the mysteries either take place on college or university campuses or directly involve people engaged in literary or academic activity. In the second novel, *The James Joyce Murder*, Kate and a graduate student are sorting the letters of a publisher who published some of the early works of James Joyce, and the chapter titles are the same as the titles of the stories in Joyce's collection *Dubliners*. In *Poetic Justice* (1970), the intrigue springs from an academic dispute about the value of adult education programs, and in *The Theban Mysteries* (1971), Kate solves a mystery at her former prep school while teaching a seminar there on *Antigone*.

With *The Question of Max* (1976), Heilbrun moves part of the setting to Oxford University, as she does again in *No Word from Winifred* (1986), thus enlarging the academic perspective and contributing also to Kate's Anglophilic tendencies.

Both *Death in a Tenured Position* and *Sweet Death, Kind Death* (1984) deal with issues surrounding women on college and university faculties, including the viability of women's studies programs, affirmative action policies, and feminist ideology.

Several kinds of evolution take place in these novels that mirror changes in American values and social concerns from the early 1960s to the mid-1990s.

One is the changing relationship between Kate Fansler and Reed Amhearst. In *In the Last Analysis*, Kate, then in her mid-thirties, dismisses as "outrageous" the idea that she and Reed will ever marry. Although at this point she resists identifying herself as a feminist, she values her independence. But by the end of *Poetic Justice*, the third novel, Kate and Reed are married, Kate having been assured that such an arrangement need not constrain her activities. Indeed it does not: Reed, after being the one actually to solve the mysteries in *The James Joyce Murder* and *Poetic Justice*, is gradually removed from Kate's detective activities, and is out of the country during all of *Death in a Tenured Position*. Major social issues are in the background—and occasionally the forefront—of these novels.

Poetic Justice, for example, features references to the Vietnam War and the effects of student protests on academic policies and structures. Increasingly, the novels have come to grips with feminist issues, not just in the academic world, but more generally, as forces affecting the nature of human relationships. At the same time, Heilbrun's method has shifted away from the tightly-plotted detective novel, such as *In the Last Analysis*, in which Kate's attention and therefore that of the reader is focused on the solving of a crime, to the more issue-oriented novel in which the solution of a mystery is a significant, but not the sole, interest of the book.



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