

# Innocent Blood Short Guide

## Innocent Blood by P. D. James

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# Characters

James owes her position as an outstanding contemporary writer to her characters. She treats them with respect, gives them backgrounds, interests, mannerisms, and values. Her creations are never stereotypes; they are alive and contemporary. Each one is individual and is distinguished from the others, both in the current work and all others. James's perceptions of human behavior, her understanding of the complex motivation that leads to crime and evil, are particularly noteworthy.

Philippa Rose Palfrey is a blonde, attractive, eighteen-year-old, who like many of her age, from Rene to James Joyce, are searching for their identity.

Her adoptive parents, Maurice and Hilda, have hardly been satisfactory role models, yet they have adequately provided for her material needs. A rebellious daughter, she is seeking for true affection and for the meaning of life. Her obvious ingratitude is tempered by a basic insecurity, a sense of rejection, and a need for roots.

Norman Scase, the father of the child murdered by Philippa's mother, Mary Ducton, pursues vengeance more from a commitment made to his deceased wife than from personal conviction. In the office from which he retires to pursue this aim full-time, he is considered a shadowy figure, aloof yet responsible. In his plotting, he is equally thorough and equally secretive. He may be the most interesting character in the book. His is a Balzacian tenacity to purpose, which ends surprisingly, and brings him in the last chapter to beg forgiveness. His revenge for a lost child contrasts with Philippa's search for her roots, and their eventual meeting has father-child overtones.

Even though James's character creation is outstanding, she has been criticized for artificiality in dialogue.

For example, Mary Ducton leaves prison after ten years and speaks "like a character out of Shakespeare." James tries to account for this by Mrs. Dueton's interest in the classics, especially Shakespeare, while in prison. However, if differences in social class are not reflected in Mary and Philippa, minor characters from the seamier side of London reflect another tone altogether, and make for greater realism.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Maureen Howard in a 1980 New York Times book review calls *Innocent Blood* "a novel clear and true . .

. a quest for personal identity, of irrational love and strain of duty between parents and children, husband and wife." Inspired by a newspaper account which James read as a consequence of the Children's Act of 1975, which permitted adopted children eighteen years or older to know the identity of their real parents, *Innocent Blood* explores one of the worst possible situations. In this story, an insecure but independent-minded eighteen-year-old Philippa Rose Palfrey learns that her father was a rapist and her mother a child murderer.

As Philippa pursues her search for identity, she becomes acquainted with a side of London she never knew in the elegant suburban surroundings in which she was brought up by the Palfreys. She discovers the complexities of love and forgiveness, and she experiences the tension between the real and the ideal, the contrast between her imagined and real past. Not only is her mother different from what she anticipated; illusions about her adoptive father also begin to crumble, and she is unsure of the world in which she finds herself, and her role in it.

The theme of revenge is admirably developed in the person of Norman Scase, whose daughter Julie was killed by Philippa's mother, Mary Ducton. At first an obsessive preoccupation, Scase's vengeance, like Philippa's quest for identity, is colored by the reality of life and his own basic human nature.

In a satirical vein, James points to the current role of social workers and sociologists as the ministers of a contemporary humanistic religion. More than this, the story deals with the themes that classical literature and popular fiction alike address: love, hate, passion, crime, power. What she says about her detective stories characterizes this work also: a search for basic values. "Murder is wrong. In an age in which gratuitous violence and arbitrary death have become common, these values need an apology."



# Techniques

James's strengths as a writer include the realism of her characters, her clear and carefully delineated plots, her deep psychological penetration, and her sense of place. In an interview with Patricia Craig for the Times Literary Supplement in 1981, she stated that for her, place is of utmost importance.

This, rather than plot or characters, is often the starting point for her novels.

She uses only places that she knows well, and describes them in picturesque and often poetic detail. In *Innocent Blood*, she takes the reader from London's more fashionable suburbs, on trains and in crowded underground stations, to the streets and shops of London's many districts, to the parks and markets, up the stairs of a dingy flat where she examines every corner, then into cheap hotels and seedy restaurants, into church services and prisons — all with remarkable clarity and detail. It is this sense of place that anchors the story in reality and gives it "a local habitation and a name."

James uses plot with great care. She chose the detective story genre because webs of intrigue demand painstaking construction, a quality she considers important in fiction. For her, the detective story was an apprenticeship to a "real novel," her ultimate ambition.

Critics have hailed *Innocent Blood* as a true novel, a work "without any qualifying genre tag." Carefully constructed in the manner of the detective story, often called a "crime novel," all the pieces of the puzzle ultimately fall into place; even the final surprises are logical. However, James is more comfortable with the usual detective format, and as Maureen Howard writes in the *New York Times*, "seems to mistrust her own art and runs for artifice." The second part of the story is slow, if not sometimes tedious; the ending becomes melodramatic, but the plot is still well constructed.

James uses language skillfully. Her stories are brief, on the whole move rapidly, and show wit as well as the chill of horror. Her verbal economy, choice of words, and construction of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters are in the best tradition of English prose.

Although her themes are modern, and often sordid, they maintain a literary objectivity that transcends much of popular fiction. Her use of symbolism is delicate and unaffected, as the use of roses in this novel: Rose is Philippa's baptismal name; rose gardens are often the scene of meetings; roses decorate the table and the china, and Philippa searches for her "patch of rose garden."

## Literary Precedents

As a writer of detective stories, James sees herself in the British classical tradition. Both she and her critics compare her to Dorothy Sayers; many feel that she surpasses her predecessor, particularly in character analysis and profound observation of human behavior. She is philosophically oriented, and expresses the tensions of modern society, and the current ambiguity of moral values. Among classical authors, her favorite is Jane Austen, for whom her second daughter was named, and whom her characters frequently quote.

She cites among her other preferred writers George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh. Her social realism points to the influence of Thomas Hardy. Critics have seen in *Innocent Blood* echoes of the Oedipus story and, in the careful descriptions of London, reminiscences of Dickens.

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# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994