Joey's Case Short Guide

Joey's Case by Carl Kosak

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Contents

Characters

The characters in Joey's Case may be divided into those present in earlier books and those newly introduced. In Joey's Case the usual nonsuspects are rounded up: the lawyer Mo Valcanas, the priest Father Marrazo, the barkeeper Dom Muscotti, Balzic's mother and his wife Ruth, and secondary figures, such as Police Sgt. Stramsky and the drunk Iron City Steve. While part of the interest in a series normally comes from finding out more about the recurrent characters, in this work there is little new material presented about most of the old faces. They serve their usual functions of reflecting the theme, helping the plot, and providing depth of "local color." For example, Mo Valcanas serves once again as a kind of Greek chorus-character, broadening the book's thematic aspects, especially when he tells the story of a client, a woman who wants a divorce.

This woman is married to a conventionally good husband but, after reading feminist literature, she feels sexually unfulfilled. Valcanas believes that there is not enough money to support two households, and that his wife should learn to fulfill her own sexual desires: If she doesn't know how to get herself off, how's she supposed to show her husband how to do it?

And if she can't show him, then what the hell's the point of divorcin' him?. . . sometimes you have to consider the social scheme of things . . .

While this story may seem to be an attack on feminism, or irrelevant to the main story, it is actually neither. Just as sexual maladjustment underlies the murder, so in the case of Valcanas's client sexual problems take precedence over "the social scheme," making the thematic point that individual psychology may be more useful than sociology in understanding crime and social disruption.

There are two exceptions to the general lack of development of the personal stories of the recurrent characters. There are new problems that Father Marrazo faces when his longestablished housekeeper is replaced by the dominating incompetent, Mrs. Dombrisky, who has been irrevocably assigned to him by the Bishop. The priest, who represents a celibate variation of the issue of sexual/psychological motivation for crime, contemplates killing his housekeeper.

More significantly, the relationship between Mario and his wife Ruth, placed under pressure by his impotence, develops so as to provide further understanding of Mario and his marriage. Ruth, who is generally a remarkably admirable woman, justifiably feels hurt by Mario's blaming her for the problem. By the end of the story she manages to make him understand this.

Balzic is a slow learner, "a stonehead, a real capo tost," as Ruth says, but un der her tutelage he is capable of reducing his masculine self-centered egotism. He says (with an unconscious pun), "Oh Christ, Ruth. I'll never keep it up," but she replies "Yes, you will...

yes you will."

There is a large cast of characters who make brief appearances, and it is an indication of Constantine's craftsmanship that the reader can keep them straight. In large measure this is because of his skill with dialogue; the characters are defined by their speech.

A number of the new characters are fairly "conventional," in the sense that while they are individualized they are stock necessities of the plot. There is the totally incompetent state trooper Helfrick, kept on the force because he "looked like a state cop," now hanging on until he gets his pension, whose mishandling of evidence provides the starting point of the plot. There is a sympathetic African American Assistant District Attorney, Horace Machlin, and a competent judge, Milan Vrbanic.

There are also characters involved in adulterous affairs, the victim Joey, his father, who draws Balzic into the case, and the murderer. Except for Joey, who is dead at the start of the story, these figures are all presented effectively and economically, mainly through their own words. Acquiring the facts about Joey, facts pieced together by Balzic from talking with those who knew the victim, constitutes the main plot line.

What is perhaps most interesting about Joey's characterization is that he is grotesque, abnormally weird to the point that had he been presented by a less skillful writer he would be unbelievable. Constantine, however, makes the murder victim figuratively "come to life."

A secondary plot line involves an elderly woman who lives in squalor surrounded by innumerable dogs, living and dead, and their excrement.

After she is dispossessed as a public nuisance by the authorities, her son, Mr. Bauk, appears in order to claim the property. He is a remarkably offensive, disturbed individual whose tirades against the "fascist" police and American traditional values nevertheless express some valid points. He serves at least three functions in the novel. First, his provoking Balzic to act unprofessionally allows the Chief to later understand why, in terms of power and potency, he overreacts to the provocation. Secondly, Bauk contributes to the "Freudian" theme of how an improper relationship to one's mother produces antisocial behavior and, finally, the miscarriage of "justice." In his case it reinforces a central thematic point; as Balzic says, "This guy Bauk reminds me every week of what power is and what it isn't."

Another character of thematic significance is Louie Woolman, a former football player now serving as a prison guard. His whole ability to function in this job is based upon his belief in his invincible physical prowess, a selfconfidence that is shattered when he sees a 160 pound convict bench-pressing 370 pounds. He comes to Balzic for advice, but all Balzic can tell him is that he must find a kind of strength not based upon 271 pounds of muscle. The parallel with Balzic, who comes to realize that his own self-respect should not depend upon his ability to have an erection or pull a gun, is implicit, but clear.

Social Concerns

As is true of all the Balzic novels, Joey's Case centers on the question of the use and misuse of power. Naturally, as a police novel, Joey's Case deals with power as it is embodied in the legal system. This system's search for justice is thwarted, in spite of the best efforts of some honest cops, district attorneys, and judges, because as a human system it is subject to disruption by incompetent police officers, uncooperative witnesses, and unscrupulous lawyers. In the end, for the first time in the series, justice totally fails, essentially because all people are not equal in the eyes of the law; justice is not blind, but astigmatic. Joey's Case is, in this respect, the most pessimistic of the series; in earlier novels some variety of justice, if not always the legal sort, did prevail.

Legal power and justice comprise only one aspect of the theme, however, and not the basic one. As in Constantine's earlier works, issues of power as related to religion, the family, the sexes, and race are touched upon, and there is a passing attack upon the misuse of authority by medical personnel and school authorities. What distinguishes Joey's Case from the other novels is the central connection made between power and potency — sexual potency.

A major part of the novel is devoted to describing Balzic's problem of sexual impotence. The main point of the material seems to be to show how Balzic's physical problem affects his work as police chief, causing him to compensate for his loss of sexual power by misusing his power as a cop, as when he unjustifiably draws a weapon. Eventually, he comes to recognize what he is doing, and thereby to see through the whole macho ethic. A key statement that he makes is: "I found out where meanness comes from. It comes from feelin' weak, it comes from feelin' you got no power." He goes on to speculate that courage and manhood really should have nothing to do with hormones and having "balls," although so much of American society, competitiveness, and military patriotism assumes this connection.

While Balzic is able to understand this, many of the other characters do not. A key witness fails to testify because of problems he has with a wife who is more strong-willed, more competent, more "masculine" than he. The murder itself hinges on an aspect of suppressed homosexuality.

Thus, a new aspect of the series' continuing central thematic discussion of power and sexuality is emphasized in Joey's Case. Constantine seems to have turned, in a loose sense, to Freudian psychology, and Joey's Case is a punning title; it is not only the murder case in which one Joey Case is killed; it is also a case study of Joey, a study which, when understood, explains why and how he is killed.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

In Joey's Case Constantine sticks to the aspects of craft he has well mastered: effective description of setting, skillfully written dialogue, and successful integration of disparate materials. The novel has increased use of dialogue and the presentation of Balzic's thoughts (techniques which are in turn related to a shift in emphasis from sociology to psychology), but uses relatively little physical description of setting. When it does appear the description again demonstrates the author's ability to present, through selective details of neighborhood and house furnishings, the essence of characters whose surroundings both express and condition their lives. The most notable example in Joey's Case occurs when Balzic visits Joey's parents, the Casteluccis.

In Joey's Case, however, unlike some of the earlier novels, characters are understood less through presentation of their conditioning milieux than by the way they talk. Constantine has been justifiably praised for his dialogue; a Boston Herald reviewer wrote, "Nobody, but nobody, has Constantine's ear for the working-class dialect of Middle America."

Even more notable than his skilled use of dialogue is Constantine's ability to integrate multiple plot lines, numerous characters, Balzic's introspection, and much anecdotal material. Constantine's interweaving of material produces his own distinct tone, one which blends the serious with the comic.

There are quite a few funny stories woven into the novel, such as that of the defendant, acting as his own attorney, who asks a witness, "Just how good a look did you get at me when I stole your purse?" A moment's reflection reveals that these stories generally are not extraneous comic relief, but reflect on theme and character. In one or two instances, though, such as Vinnie's spoonerism story about alligators, Constantine may have allowed his appreciation of a good joke to take precedence over his sense of unified construction.

Constantine's sense of humor, which in its portrayal of characters sometimes resembles Charles Dickens's when combined with his serious themes, relates him to a tradition of seriocomic novelists; comparisons with Mark Twain and Joseph Heller, while tenuous, are legitimate. In any case, Constantine is not a writer merely of detective fiction; he has moved increasingly in the directions of writing "serious" fiction, with the crime becoming more and more an excuse for presenting insights into the contemporary human condition. In this respect, the crimenovel writer whom he now may most closely resemble is Nicholas Freeling.

Related Titles

As has been noted, Constantine's two most recent books reveal new trends in his work. Both Joey's Case and Sunshine Enemies (1990) reduce the importance of the "whodunit" suspense found in his earlier novels, especially in The Blank Page (1974). He uses dialogue even more extensively than in The Man Who Liked To Look At Himself (1973). An increased proportion of both Joey's Case and Sunshine Enemies is devoted to Balzic's introspection. The most notable difference between Joey's Case and previous Balzic books, however, is the shift to an emphasis on psychological and, to an extent, even hormonal explanations of human behavior. Whereas previously Constantine related the psychological to the sociological, giving the latter greater or at least equal weight, he has now changed the balance. If Constantine continues this emphasis, he may become a writer of mainstream fiction, and although his skills will certainly continue to produce absorbing fiction, something of his previously unique quality may be lost.

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