

Killshot Short Guide

Killshot by Elmore Leonard

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Characters

The characters in *Killshot* are credible largely because there is a minimum of authorial intrusion, and Leonard regularly shifts the narrative point of view to accommodate each of his major figures. A result of this method is that *Killshot* lacks some of the suspense that typifies the genre, but nevertheless there is a succession of gripping episodes, and the lengthy introspective passages provide insight into characters' thoughts and plans and heighten the tension. Being informed of their intentions does not guarantee foreknowledge of how they will act.

Armand Degas (Blackbird) is the most compelling figure in the novel, and Leonard avoids making him a stereotypical villain by focusing upon his Ojibway background and his spiritual link to his grandmother, an Indian mystic. A gun-for-hire and a determined loner, he establishes temporary ties with others only to serve his immediate purposes. But he is complex. Near the end of *Killshot*, disgusted with Richie, Degas dismisses him as "something stuck to the bottom of your shoe you couldn't get rid of, like . . .

. chewing gum." At the same time Degas thinks about taking Donna (with whom he and Nix are living) to Memphis to see Elvis Presley's Graceland: "Why not? She was a stupid woman, but that was okay, he was tired of being alone in hotel rooms, bars, motels—take her on a trip, play some Yahtzee One moment he felt relieved, a weight lifted off him . . . the next moment he didn't feel so good."

Having lived a joyless life, Degas does not even gain satisfaction from his professional successes, perhaps because he is too introspective, too bright, and too disciplined. A master of his craft, he is impatient with partners—including his brother—who act impetuously and risk their own well-being and that of others.

Richie Nix is a different kind of criminal. He wants to rob a bank in every state and gain mention in *The Guinness Book of World Records*; he has only thirteen states to go. Along the way, however, he has spent time in prison and boasts that "he had an NCIC sheet that printed out of that national crime computer as tall as he was: six feet in his curl-toed cowboy boots with three inner soles inside."

Neither a true six-footer nor the big-time operator he thinks he is, this man-child conceives of a scam he believes is "higher class" than bank robbery and "took more thought." However, the extortion scheme he attempts with his new acquaintance, Degas, is a disaster, partly because Nix is no more than a small-time bank robber with a murderous bent. Instead of Degas rescuing him and salvaging the scheme, Nix draws both of them into a fatal abyss. Immature and not very bright, he is a born loser who craves the love and attention he was denied even as a child.

Quite the opposite, Carmen and Wayne Colson are Leonard's middle American ideals: Happily married for twenty years, they have a son who was a varsity athlete in high



school and then joined the navy. Wayne is a union member who wears a jacket with the legend "IRONWORKERS BUILD AMERICA" and goes deer hunting. Carmen dabbles at handwriting analysis and works for a realtor, nursing the dream that Wayne someday will work with her. Accidentally caught in a trap intended for someone else, the Colsons are strong, resilient, and resourceful. They even endure a period in the Witness Security Protection program that is notable mainly for the boorish behavior of Ferris Britton, a macho deputy on the make.

For much of the book, whether set in their hometown, Algonac, Michigan, or Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where the federal government sets them up, Carmen lives in a state of siege. With Wayne usually at work or on the road, she bears most of the burden of confronting their adversaries. When the climactic moment finally arrives, she hesitates: "It was loaded ... Now, go do it. And thought, I can't. And told herself, Don't think. But at the bedroom door, her hand on the old-fashioned key sticking out of the lock, she started thinking again, she couldn't help it." But later: "That fast, Christ, she had it aimed at him, holding it in both hands with her eyes wide open—not scared-to-death open, just open, staring at him And she shot him. Fired his own gun at him . . . and she shot him again, socked him in the chest with it so hard he went back against the chair and sat down. She was still pointing the gun at him." By the time Wayne returns, Carmen has rid their house of all traces of the siege, and the novel ends with Wayne the same bad listener he always has been, but encouraging Carmen to try deer hunting with him this year: "Hey, it's something we could do together." Evil overcome, normality returns; and, after all, nothing much has changed in the lives of these ordinary people.



Social Concerns

Killshot, his twenty-seventh novel, InElmore Leonard dramatizes the traumatic effect of weak law enforcement on innocentdeputies,indifferentthey also people. City police, sheriffs' and FBI men invariably are and insensitive; frequently are inefficient and bumbling.

The only completely sympathetic characters in the novel are Carmen and Wayne Colson, the couple whose lives are changed when they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. That they manage to survive and prevail despite the authorities' incompetence and unprofessionalism is testimony to their own persistence, courage, and ingenuity.

Leonard aims critical barbs not only at law enforcement people, but also at the criminal justice system. Both of the novel's psychopathic villains have been in and out of prisons, but no matter how serious and how frequent their crimes, they make it back into society. Armand Degas and Richie Nix are not run-of-themill thugs, but cold-blooded murderers who cannot even remember how often they have killed. Degas, familiarly called Blackbird, is half Ojibway and half French-Canadian and does not recall his father; Nix, as he describes himself, has "lived with women in foster homes and women since then." Implicit in the novel is Leonard's concern that in very diverse places (the book is set in locales in the United States and Canada), the system fails so utterly that asocial men emerge.

His disappointment in the system is heightened by the portrayal of Degas as a man with a keen sense of his Ojibway roots and devotion to the grandmother who personifies them. Nix may be a drifter, but Degas is not, which makes the tragedy of his life even more troublesome.

Techniques

Leonard's narrative technique, including interior monologues and his careful probing of the villains' psyches, enables the reader to see things from their perspective and to gain understanding of them. Even with this insight, it is difficult to sympathize with these men, because they always act completely antithetically to accepted social norms. Another technique he uses is the interweaving of tense confrontations and murder episodes with realistically developed domestic scenes involving ironworkers and their families.

Themes

In *Killshot*, Leonard transcends mere crime fiction with his domestic and on-the-job interludes. What emerges is the belief that the ironworkers and their families have a stability deriving from their membership in a group, and that vital to the social units of work and home are trust and interdependence. In contrast, Degas and Nix are loners who never have had continuing ties, personal or otherwise. Although they become partners early in the book, live together for a while, and even share the same woman, theirs is a relationship of convenience; they neither trust nor respect one another. The partnership ends as it began, with one man pointing a gun at the other.

To an extent, then, the novel celebrates the family and the traditional work ethic, as well as man as a social being. An aging Mafia don is the first person Degas murders in *Killshot*, slain at the behest of a son-in-law. Immediately after the killing, Degas crosses the border into Canada to visit—for the first time in nine years—his Indian grandmother, but she had died the previous winter. In the next episode, Leonard introduces the Colsons, in love with each other and with their son, who is in the navy. This juxtaposition of contrasting portraits—the Mafia's perversion of family, Degas's loss of the last link with his roots, and the Colsons' embodiment of an ideal family—sets up a fundamental contrast that provides the thematic foundation of the novel.



Key Questions

Leonard strives for realism in all of his novels, but *Killshot*, to a much greater degree than others, seems journalistic in style and form. This has led to comparisons between it and books about criminals by such writers as Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. An initial focus upon Leonard's techniques in this novel, specifically how he heightens the realism, will lead logically to an examination of other aspects of it.

1. How does the first murder in *Killshot*, that of an old Mafia don, presage what is to come in the novel?
2. What is the effect of Leonard's alternating domestic scenes with those involving the villains?
3. How important thematically and for character development is Degas's visit to Canada and the general focus upon his Indian background?
4. Are the pair of villains in this book, Degas and Nix, related to any previous villainous partnership in Leonard?
5. Domestic scenes are important in *Killshot*. Are there similar scenes in earlier novels? How do they compare with those involving the Colsons?
6. Who is the stronger person, Carmen or Wayne Colson? Why do they make such a good couple?
7. Leonard's first venture into crime fiction was his reading of such writers as Frederic Brown and Erle Stanley Gardner. Are there any echoes of novels by these men in *Killshot*?
8. Is *Killshot* a police procedural? Is it a parody of the form? Or is it neither?
9. Who are the heroes of this novel? It has been said that Leonard's heroes never are imposing persons. Is the statement valid for *Killshot*?
10. At the end of a crime novel, there always is a return to normality. Are the Colsons the same at the end of *Killshot* as they were before their horrific experiences?

Literary Precedents

Much of the novel probes the depths of the criminal psyche in a manner that recalls Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), with the two criminals being remarkably close in their psychopathic orientation to Capote's pair. Leonard develops his novel in a manner that is close to Capote's journalistic realism.

Related Titles

Armand Degas to an extent is a reworking of characters in earlier Leonard novels, primarily Bobby Leary of *Unknown Man No. 89* (1977) and Roland Crowe of *Gold Coast* (1980). The latter, like Degas, is an enforcer for the mob, a former inmate, and a frequent murderer.

Crowe's last name and Degas's nickname, Blackbird, also suggest a kinship.

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