

# LaBrava Short Guide

## LaBrava by Elmore Leonard

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# Characters

Joe LaBrava, in his late thirties, went from guarding Bess Truman to being a freelance photographer prowling the streets of South Miami Beach; the main character, he not only has a feel for a good picture, but also a keen understanding of people, for his eye, like the lens of his camera, penetrates to the essence of those he meets. In addition, he inspires confidence and trust in people, such as canny Maurice Zola, who confides, "I'm going to tell you a secret I never told anybody around here," and worldly-wise women such as Franny Kaufman and Jean Shaw. Although a resident of the Delia Robbia Hotel and despite his deep involvements (sexual and otherwise) with the people and all that happens to them, LaBrava remains an outsider, the detached observer and moral center of the novel.

Retired bookmaker Maurice Zola, twenty years older than LaBrava, has been part of the south Florida scene for thirty- five years and has experienced it all: the women, the scams, the good times and the bad. He has made money, lost some, still has plenty left. Surprisingly, he retains a fair amount of trust for people, looking out for the well-being of those he admires, particularly Jean Shaw and LaBrava. At the end of the book, when he and Shaw decide to marry ("Make life easier for both of us ... We're tired a living alone."), Zola says, "I'm gonna take good care of her," which is precisely what he has been doing for years. Shaw, long retired from the screen, continues to live in a make-believe world, watching old films and courting young men. But when the movie based scam she orchestrates gets out of hand and Joe has to save her, she finally embraces real life and decides to marry Zola: "It's not the movies, Joe."

The villains of the piece, beachfront hustlers Richard Nobles and Cundo Rey, have legitimate sources of income: husky, blond Nobles is a sometime private security guard; Cuban refugee Rey is a go-go dancer. But they prefer automobile theft and other criminal activities, not excluding cold-blooded murder. One of Cundo Rey's guiding principles is that anger is good if one can "use it right away" and "let it pick you up and carry you." Ironically, he rarely exhibits the emotion, and the maxim more properly describes Nobles. Although both men possess the requisite fearlessness and determination, their ineptness and lack of vision squelch their dreams of success.

## Social Concerns

Decadence pervades LaBrava, the action of which takes place primarily in South Miami Beach, Florida. There is a seedy Art Deco hotel, most of whose permanent residents are elderly widows; a county crisis center that gives alcoholics a place to dry out; a freelance photographer (a Secret Service dropout) who specializes in the grotesque after the manner of Diane Arbus; a Murf the Surf kind of hustler who preys upon defenseless women; a Cuban, boat-lifted from a Castro prison, who is a go-go dancer and car thief; and a former actress who uses the plot of one of her old films to fashion a real crime. All have been affected by, and have come to terms with, their grim milieus, for better or worse.

## Techniques

In this as in Leonard's other novels, dialogue bears the burden of developing plot, character, and setting; the chapters are brief (twenty-eight in the 283-page book), so each is similar to a scene in an unfolding drama. These traits combine to produce a fast-paced novel that also is notable for its realism. (Leonard in an interview recalled having ". . . spent some time with the Miami Beach police, one detective in particular, for LaBrava. Asked a lot of questions about situations that appear in the book. What happens if a woman who lives in one of the hotels receives an extortion note, what do you do? What's the procedure in investigating this kind of case? Do you bring in the FBI? And so on. I find out exactly how they would handle the investigation.")

The third person omniscient narrator is singularly unobtrusive; rather, Joe LaBrava is the author's surrogate, the central conscience. Through his friendship with Zola, LaBrava becomes involved in the lives and intrigues of everyone else in the novel, which unfolds incrementally beginning with the second chapter car ride when LaBrava goes with Zola to rescue Jean Shaw. But he is not the voice of the author, merely an honest and stable presence, a touchstone against which everyone else is measured. And at the end, he is the same: still a photographer, disillusioned a bit, an ordinary man who found himself in a peck of trouble, but not otherwise changed by his experiences.

Leonard, like all successful writers of suspense fiction, delights in tricky endings, and the conclusion of this novel is a typical surprise, foremost to LaBrava.

Rejecting any of the three likely endings, Leonard has come up with a morally ambivalent fourth option that LaBrava accepts with an ungrudging "Why not?"

## Themes

Counterpointing the noteworthy verisimilitude of the dialogue and stark realism of the settings is the pervasive illusion theme, which centers on the nostalgia enveloping Jean Shaw. Her words and actions are so intertwined with film lines she spoke and roles she played years ago that make-believe and reality blur. Leonard suggests that people need their illusions, not only aging film stars but ordinary people too. People also need one another. The villains Nobles and Rey usually operate as a team; Shaw and Zola years ago forged their unusual, yet useful, symbiotic relationship; and although LaBrava is a loner, he frequently forms close, albeit temporary, relationships.



## Key Questions

LaBrava is Leonard's breakthrough novel: His Mystery Writers of America peers gave it the prestigious Edgar as the best book of 1984, and the media discovered him. A discussion of LaBrava could begin by considering why it would lead so many people finally to sit up and notice a writer who previously had produced sixteen crime novels without causing much of a stir.

1. Leonard develops his settings realistically. How important is the Miami Beach milieu to the story he tells in LaBrava?

2. Does Maurice Zola's Delia Robbia Hotel function other than as backdrop?

And what is the role of its residents, such as cosmetics salesperson Franny Kaufman?

3. The fact that LaBrava is a photographer is important in terms of the plot.

Does it function, too, in terms of character development and theme?

4. Maurice Zola describes LaBrava as "one of those quiet guys, you never know what he's gonna do next." Is Zola correct, or is La Brava predictable?

5. Canny Maurice Zola confides to LaBrava: "I'm going to tell you a secret I never told anybody around here." Why does LaBrava inspire such confidence and trust in people?

6. Given all the scams and bad times Zola has experienced over half a century, is it credible that he retains so much trust for people and looks out for the welfare of others?

7. LaBrava is the person who undoes the two partners in crime, Cundo Rey and Richard Nobles. Aside from their being on the other side of the law, in what ways do they differ from him, and why is LaBrava appropriately their nemesis?

8. Leonard is full of surprises in LaBrava, not the least of which is his conclusion. How credible is it? Does Leonard at all prepare the reader for this final twist?

9. Leonard considered three possible conclusions other than the one he used: Jean Shaw is arrested; Jean Shaw dies; Jean Shaw ends up with all of the money.

How would these have worked? Is the one he used the best?

10. At the end, evidently putting her celluloid past behind her and ready finally to embrace real life, Jean Shaw tells LaBrava, "It's not the movies, Joe." To what else is she referring?

11. Shaw was ruled by her illusions.

Could the same statement be made about LaBrava? Of others in the novel?

## Literary Precedents

Richard Nobles and Cundo Rey, small time hustlers though they are, are cut of the same cloth as are Braden and his compeers in *Hombre* (1961; see separate entry). There is no real difference between Nobles and Rey and the typical bad guys of the western fiction genre. Joe LaBrava, like John Russell of *Hombre*, is unable to remain the dropout he had become. His social conscience, romantic nature, and Secret Service background recall the private eyes of Chandler, Hammett, and Macdonald.



## Related Titles

Pronto also is set partially in Miami Beach, and Harry Arno, its main character, lives in Maurice Zola's former apartment in the Delia Robbia Hotel.

Arno recalls that when Zola died a year or so after marrying Jean Shaw, she sold the place to a gangster, Jimmy Capotorto, and like the other Art Deco hotels in the neighborhood, it has been renovated since Zola's day. Some of the characters in LaBrava are clones of figures in other books, for example, Nobles recalls Raymond Gidre (Unknown Man No. 89) and Roland Crowe (Gold Coast, 1980), and Jane Shaw echoes Nancy Hayes (The Big Bounce, 1969) and Karen DiCilia (Gold Coast).



# 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