Legs Short Guide

Legs by William Kennedy

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Characters

Kennedy struggled for six years to find an adequate narrative framework for his story of Diamond. In the character of Marcus Gorman he manages a point of view equal to the complexity of his hero Diamond. Gorman is a respected lawyer, incipient politician, public speaker, "one of Albany's communion breakfast intellectuals ..." But like the establishment hypocrites he criticizes, Gorman also has allegiances on both sides of the legal and criminal communities. He belongs to the Knights of Columbus, delivers a Sunday communion breakfast speech on gangsterism to the Police Department, is a prominent trial attorney familiar with local politicians, district attorneys, and judges. At the same time, he arranges for fifteen witnesses to perjure themselves providing Diamond with an alibi in the Streeter case, fabricates a nun's impassioned exoneration of Jack's behavior in closing arguments before a jury, transports a hundred and eighty thousand dollars of gang money for Diamond, violently sexually assaults a woman. He says about himself "I admit to a corrupt nature. Profligacy, sloth, licentiousness, gluttony, pride. Proud of it all."

Gorman is both the intelligent observer of the complex Diamond and himself a product of the moral climate of his time. He says "I am bored by people who keep returning life to a moral, plane . . ." That combination makes him an intelligent observer but also a suspect narrator. His admiration for Diamond is marked by his own amorality and allows the reader to question the validity of that admiration however corrupt the establishment may be. He says about himself at one point "yes, I know, even as a spectator, I was condoning the worst sort of behavior.

Absolute worst. I know, I know." That self-appraisal captures the dilemma of Gorman's narrative perspective as well as the complex moral ambiance of the period. Gorman's honesty admits complicity in Diamond's criminality and that clarity of vision creates confidence in his judgements about political corruption. The moral perspective of the novel is complicated because of Gorman.

The two women in Diamond's life, Marion "Kiki" Roberts his mistress and Alice Diamond his wife, both develop Jack as the physically irresistible life force whose domestic and sexual life stand in complex opposed ways to his gangster persona. Gorman calls Kiki a sexual "powerhouse" and while in various stages of unself-conscious dishabille she evokes in Gorman sexual desire which he cannot show. That is her effect on all the men she meets and makes Diamond that much more powerful for being the man who has her.

She initially is unaware of the brutal side of Diamond, but as the novel progresses she must deal with that reality.

She deals with it by enduring it; Kiki is an uncomplicated sensualist. She says to herself, "You knew as you read about the torture he did and the killing he did that you wouldn't give him up because you knew about the other side of that glorious man, with his candy up in your sweet place and his mouth on yours." Later, when Diamond is recuperating

from his wounds and temporarily impotent, Kiki will wander the house impatiently wondering when some fudge candy she has made will harden.

Alice is the more complex of Diamond's women. Theirs is the domestic relationship and in it we see Jack allowing himself to fall under the influence of an essentially loving and wellmeaning woman. She and Jack have set up house at Jimmy Biondo's farm in the Catskills when Gorman visits them at the beginning of the novel. She and Jack go to mass together, she puts a rosary and a prayer book near his bed when he is in the hospital, she nurses Diamond back to health after his near assassination. Jack envisions building a country estate for the two of them.

They keep two canaries and Jack buys her two dogs upon returning from Europe. She is not passive, and kills one of the canaries when Jack announces he is going out. She objects to his criminal behavior and tries to get him to retire. Like Gorman, she is intelligent and aware of her complicity but unlike Gorman she wants Jack to reform and live a normal life. Her Catholicism, unlike Gorman's, seems to have genuine roots. She says to herself: [she] knew she was married to one of the rottenest sons of bitches to come along in this century.

Just the fact that she was able to sit there stroking his fingers and the back of his hand and running her hand through his bittykittymins gave her evidence of her moral bankruptcy. Yet she was still trying to reform John. She didn't want him to be a Mason on the square. She wanted a genuine four-cornered Catholic.

Gorman calls her "The greatest of the underworld women. Paragon of wifely virtue. Never did a wrong thing in her life." In another of the scenes so perfectly symbolic it contributes to the mythic characterization of Jack, he, Kiki, and Alice, living together for their mutual protection in the Kenmore Hotel, have dinner one night in the Rain-Bo room. Jack, weak from his wounds, takes a lover in each arm and begins a slow waltz to the tune "Two Hearts in Three-Quarter Time" as the entire dining room crowd applauds.

Social Concerns/Themes

L egs deals with the meteoric career of Prohibition era gangster Jack "Legs" Diamond who was murdered in 1931 at age thirty-four in an Albany, New York rooming house. Kennedy recognized in Diamond a character whose dynamic individualism made him a mythic hero in American culture during The Depression and Prohibition. The primary social concern of the novel involves the raising of a gangster to such celebrated stature in the public mind. Kennedy said in his essay "The Death of Legs Diamond" in O Albany!

(1983): "He was a complex figure, and the world's response to him was equal ly complex."

Kennedy saw in the historical record contradictory public perceptions of the gangster during the morally ambiguous period of Prohibition. In the same essay from O Albany! Kennedy said "What I came to ... was a plan to assimilate all the truth, all the lies, all the fudged areas in between, and reinvent Jack." That fictional reinvention involved humanizing the brutal Diamond by showing him as a physically resilient, calculating, attractive, charitable, multifaceted human being operating in a morally ambiguous world that neutralized much of Diamond's menacing behavior to straight society.

The reinvention was not pure fiction on Kennedy's part but a careful attempt to select and portray significant dimensions from the highly contradictory history and legend that emerged during Diamond's career.

The complex Diamond was both a gangster and a married, sometimes churchgoing, citizen. He is described in the novel primarily through the eyes of Marcus Gorman, an Albany lawyer and political insider fascinated by the Diamond persona. Gorman sees a physical aura, feels a palpable electricity surrounding Diamond when they first begin their friendship. That physical vitality stands in marked contrast to both the enervated Gorman and the enervated society of the time. Gorman responds to the physical euphoria he feels the first time he visits Diamond and takes target practice using a Thompson submachine gun. As he finds he has a talent for hitting the targets with Dutch Schultz' face on them, he feels a surge of excitement: "How boring it is not to fire machine guns," he says. As he walks away from the targets he is told by a Diamond henchman that Schultz has just killed a "kid cousin" of his. Gorman responds, "And so I had moral support for my little moral collapse — which sent a thrill through me, made me comfortable again ..."

Gorman acknowledges his own emptiness ("my life was a stupendous bore") and that of establishment America ("I felt I was at the center of America's well-fed Depression complacency"). That complacency is spiritual rather than social, as America during Prohibition evoked memories of a violent frontier past. Diamond represents to Gorman the individualist American thriving in a violent America: "a singular being in a singular land, a fusion of the individual life flux with the clear and violent light of American reality, with the fundamental brilliance that illuminates this bloody republic."

Diamond's physical vitality, symbolized by the aura, manifests itself in different ways. His sexual vitality and attractiveness in the competing eyes of both his voluptuous showgirl mistress Kiki Roberts and devoted wife Alice fascinate the public. He is propositioned while on his European trip and later while dining in the Rain-Bo room with both his wife and mistress. During his trial, he receives propositions in the mail. Gorman calls him "a man in touch with primal needs." He survives four attempts on his life, including one where he is shot with five bullets by five gangsters at point blank range. He is handsome, well dressed, a "dude of all gangsters," a "dauphin" according to Gorman.

The opening line of the novel is Gorman's ("I really don't think he's dead") and the last line of the novel is the dead Diamond's ("Honest to God, Marcus ... I really don't think I'm dead"). These fanciful denials of his mortality which frame the narrative express the incredulity of both characters that the seemingly invincible Diamond could be killed. His mythic presence in the public consciousness asserts another kind of vitality. In his status as folk hero and legendary figure he has achieved immortality and outlasted death.

Diamond's physical vitality is complemented by his shrewdness as a gangster. Gorman recognizes his calculated menace: "He was aberrated, yes, eccentric, but his deeds were willful and logical, part of a career pattern, even those that seemed most spontaneous and most horrendous." His brief but rapid rise to prominence results from his ability to manipulate, outsmart, and brutalize enemies and allies alike into obedience. He avenges attempts on his own life and insults against his mistress Kiki. He kills within the predatory subculture of the gangster world and does so in direct response to threats to his own life, honor, or business. Flossie the whore recalls Diamond's no-nonsense authority: "He was our protector . . . Some protector ... It was him and his guys beat up Loretta and Marlene . . . But they also took care nobody shook us down and nobody arrested us."

Gorman echoes Kennedy's own words when he calls Diamond "the most active brain in the New York underworld . . . shaping the dream that you could grow up in America and shoot your way to glory and riches."

To show Diamond's worth, Gorman inventories liquor confiscated by federal officers in one raid on Diamond's supplies and values it at $10 million.

This version of the American dream during the Depression was clearly not morally inspired. Diamond's attraction is picaresque, his appeal found in the egoistic acquisitiveness and amoral energy that defined the establishment and outlaw loner hero. In a breathtakingly complex genealogy, Gorman sees Diamond in the tradition of "Horatio Alger out of Finn McCool and Jessie James" and shortly thereafter says "If you liked Carnegie and Custer, you'll love Diamond." Another character simplifies the heroic ancestry, quoting Oscar Wilde: "Americans love heroes, especially crooked ones." Diamond becomes among the first cultural antiheroes of the century.

Diamond's stature as antihero was dependent in large degree on the public view of bootleggers and bootlegging during Prohibition: "a necessary social misdemeanor, as most bootlegging was contemporaneously regarded" according to Gorman. Diamond makes a disingenuous distinction when he tells the British newspapermen "First off, boys, I'm not a gangster, only a bootlegger...

Just a man of the people trying to make a dollar." Bootlegging quenched the public thirst and provided a source of illegal income to untold numbers of otherwise unemployed citizens and ameliorated its illegality to a large segment of the American public. Gorman says about Diamond, "He advanced the cause of joyful corruption and vice." "He was a bootlegger and, as such, had celebrity status, plus permission from the social order to kill, maim, and befoul the legal system, for wasn't he performing a social mission for the masses?" says Gorman with that ironic perspective Prohibition morality created. Jack the bootlegger also happens to be an active Mason.

Bootlegging was the consequence of unpopular Prohibition politics which in turn corrupted politicians and neutralized Diamond's complicity. In reflecting on the Albany politicians with whom he is associated, Gorman says "They could do beer business all year long with Jack, but after mass on Sunday they could tut-tut over the awful gangsterism that was fouling the city."

This political hypocrisy and corruption during Prohibition is another major social concern in the novel. In an extended passage, Gorman contends that Jack was...a pawn of the entire decade. Politicians used him, and others like him, to carry off any vileness that served their ends, beginning with the manipulation of strikebreakers as the decade began and ending with the manipulation of stockbrokers at the end of the crash, a lovely, full, capitalistic circle.

His contempt for the political establishment he himself has courted leads Gorman to note in one of the most thematically significant passages in the book: When I think back now to whether the Congress or the time with Jack would have given me more insight into American life, I always lean to Jack. In the Congresswould have learned how rudimentary hypocrisy is turned into patriotism, into national policy, and into the law, and how hypocrites become heroes of the people.

What I learned from Jack was that politicians imitated his style without comprehending it, without understanding that their venality was only hypocritical. Jack failed thoroughly as a hypocrite. He was a liar, of course, a perjurer, but he was also a venal man of integrity, for he never ceased to renew his vulnerability to punishment, death, and damnation. It is one thing to be corrupt. It is another to behave in a psychologically responsible way toward your own evil.

Diamond's vulnerability is renewed each time his life or freedom are threatened by other gangsters or the law. Gorman sees him as a man willing to face the potentially fatal consequences of his highly risky behavior without flinching. The phrase "venal integrity" nicely captures the paradox of the gangster antihero.

Gorman's cynicism towards the corrupt establishment accounts in part for his own fascination with Legs. He sees in Diamond's charisma, leadership, and public popularity "an ancestral paradigm for modern urban political gangsters." In one of the most pointed of Gorman's observations, he says he does not want to trivialize Jack's achievement by linking him to lesser latter day figures such as Richard Nixon...whose corruption, overwhelmingly venal and invariably hypocritical, lacked the admirably white core fantasy that can give evil a mythic dimension. Only boobs and shitheads rooted for Nixon in his troubled time, but heroes and poets followed Jack's tribulations with curiosity, ambivalent benevolence, and a sense of mystery at the meaning of their own response.

Kennedy's depiction of Diamond makes no attempt to hide his brutality.

Diamond empties his gun into Tim Regan at the Hotsy Totsy Club, then cracks Billy Regan over the head with the gun butt and throws the gun into his chest. He burns up Red Moran in a car and then ties sewer grates to Moran's girl friend and throws her alive into the river. His kidnapping and torture of Clem Streeter is maniacal and to no purpose. Kennedy said about Diamond in the Diamond essay in O Albany! that "His cruelty pervades my book." In one symbolic reflection of that, Diamond enters the hold of the Belgenland which is transporting 4500 canaries for the Hartz Mountain company. Immediately upon his entering the hold, the singing birds go silent as if recognizing his menacing presence.

But the cruelty is confined by and large to the predatory gangster world and is thus immoral within that immoral context, neutralizing it to the sympathetic observer struck by the hypocrisy of the unethical political commonwealth. Diamond's own integrity within the ambiguous ethical climate of Prohibition casts him as less unethical than that political establishment. After being shot, he refuses to follow the advice of a Broadway producer to retire from the rackets, repent, and become an evangelist, a preacher capitalizing on his previous notoriety: "Force-feed 'em their own home-grown bullshit" the producer encourages Diamond. After Diamond's murder, both Kiki and Alice try to capitalize on their relationships with him through tawdry and unsuccessful personal appearances which are seen in pathetic contrast to their once regal aloofness as Jack's consorts. On his European trip, Jack literally scares the excrement out of a decadent young German playwright who lectures Jack on his Nietzschian status as a morally transcendent superman in an attempt to flatter Jack into letting him write a play based on his life. Jack's integrity in the face of his lionization by a fawning public audience bespeaks purity of motive, violent and venal as it may be. His first notice of Gorman occurs when Gorman is voicing a sympathetic interpretation of Al Jolson that stuns Diamond for its accuracy and relevance: "it's all emotion, all a revelation of who he is. I don't care how much he's rehearsed it, it's still rare because it's pure. He's so at home in himself he can't make a false gesture." The contrast between integrity and hypocrisy is critical to ameliorating the character of Diamond.

Kennedy humanizes Jack beyond these contrasts with a corrupt establishment. The local people in the Catskills tell stories attributing Diamond with paying medical expenses to cure a sick child, and financing the costs of building a new cow shed for an

old woman. He and Alice sometimes attend mass, and Jack donates an organ to the Sacred Heart Church. After he is shot five times by rival Jimmy Biondo's men he tells Gorman "I'm in God's grace," and makes confession to a priest. Diamond admits to purchasing life insurance for the families of men he was about to murder and several times expresses regret for the children of the first man he kills. Later, after his conviction in federal court on bootlegging charges, he tells a young admirer "Stay in school. The rackets are a bum life . .

. Don't mess in the rackets." A few moments later, recollecting his brother Eddie, dead from tuberculosis, Diamond cries.

Techniques

Kennedy's extensive historical research resulted in what he called in his O Albany! essay on Diamond "a novel that is historical in outline." The narrative sequence of actual events tracing Diamond's rapid rise and demise during the years 1929-1931 includes his murder of Red Cassiday (Tim Regan in the novel) at the Hotsy Totsy Club in 1929, his involvement in the killing of Harry Western (Charlie Northrup in the novel) in 1930, his trip to Europe to buy narcotics and avoid questioning in the Western murder, his near assassination by rival gangsters after returning home, his kidnapping and torturing of Grover Parks (Clem Streeter in the novel) during his convalescence, his two trials for that crime and his defense by prominent Albany attorney Daniel H. Prior (not to be "associated directly" with lawyer Marcus Gorman in the novel), and, finally, Diamond's murder shortly thereafter in 1931.

References to prominent contemporaries appear throughout the novel adding to its rich historical texture: Diamond admires and discusses Al Jolson, has read The Great Gatsby, claims to have met and talked to Fitzgerald, and worked for Rothstein, the alleged model for Gatsby. Gorman refers to actors Jimmy Cagney and Billy Halop in their roles in contemporary gangster films, and to the gangster films Underworld (which Diamond saw twice) and Public Enemy ("touted as the real story of Jack Diamond when it played Albany"). References to real gangsters Arnold Rothstein, Dutch Schultz, Al Capone echo through the book. New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt establishes the grand jury that investigates Diamond; impresario Flo Ziegfeld expresses admiration for Kiki Roberts; interviews and stories about Diamond abound in the New York tabloids. Kennedy admitted to doing too much research for Legs, claiming it could "overburden the imagination."

Diamond's career is seen through the eyes of Albany lawyer and narrator Marcus Gorman, Diamond's showgirl mistress Kiki Roberts, his wife Alice, and assorted minor characters whose differing perspectives on Diamond's violent gangster and more attractive personal self contribute to the complex image of the gangster hero. The novel opens with survivors of Diamond's old crowd gathered in 1976 reminiscing about his death and exaggerating in fond alcoholic reverie. "I liked all their lies best, for I think they are the brightest part of anybody's history" says Gorman acknowledging the degree to which aesthetically enhanced exaggeration supersedes history in the public as well as private consciousness. The many recalled and embellished personal and journalistic histories will create what Diamond himself calls his "mythical figure in the public mind."

Kennedy achieves the multifaceted portrait of Diamond by having him described from different points of view often juxtaposed for ironic effect within the novel. Gorman's is the most pervasive point of view, and his intelligence, and insider's perceptions into the politics of the period make him a plausible albeit flawed judge of what he sees.

By selectively changing point of view, Kennedy adds to the complexity of Diamond. The first of several extended narratives involving Kiki takes place after Jimmy Biondo has

insulted her. Diamond asks Gorman to have dinner with her, during which she tells Gorman "Jack is a gentleman always and one of the tenderest, sweetest human persons I've ever come across."

At about that same time, one of Biondo's men is being shot through the head and neck four times to avenge the insult, and the unstated implication is that it is Diamond or one of his gang that has done it. Kiki will change her opinion of Jack but her fascination for the man who doesn't treat her like his whore will remain constant.

Immediately following that scene, Gorman meets Jesse Franklin, the black custodian of Diamond's upstate farm, who has fled the location because he found the mutilated body of Charlie Northrup. Not only does the scene add ironic contrast to Kiki's image of the tender Jack, but it affirms the cold blooded brutality of the Diamond gang and Jack's involvement in the Northrup murder, an involvement he equivocates about to Gorman on the earlier European trip. Presented directly from Jesse's mind, the segment communicates the terrified withdrawal of a once loyal admirer of Jack's: "These is bad people . . . Bad people, doin' that to a man."

Later in the novel, another shift in point of view occurs when an Italian waiter (serving meals to the sequestered Diamond menage-a-trois of Jack, Kiki, and Alice) talks to Gorman.

Again in strong dialect, the waiter observes about the notorious Jack "You ask me was he an animal, a beast — I say no . . . He must've had some kind of good in him ... I never even hear him curse. Very refine. Pardon me, pardon me . . . tank you, see ya tomorra." While the reader knows the portrait to be only partially accurate, the waiter has only his own partial knowledge as empirical evidence of the notorious Jack. The same sequence conveys the awed admiration the public had for Jack's ability to command the loyalty and affection of two voluptuous rival females. It is in the novel's portrayal of these multiple fragmentary recollections that the complex mythic persona of Diamond evolves.

Key Questions

Legs provides considerable subject matter for discussion. It might most effectively be discussed alongside both literary and cinematic treatments of gangsters since that subject has such appeal in American popular culture. A comparison of Legs and Billy Bathgate might be particularly interesting because of their reliance on a first person narrative point of view and relatively perceptive albeit very different narrators in terms of age. The Godfather films all concern themselves with that gangster integrity which Gorman admires in Diamond and which is worth analyzing. While gangster movies are too numerous to note here, a film entitled Legs Diamond starring Ray Danton might offer an interesting counterpoint to Kennedy's fiction in showing the difference between serious (Kennedy's) and popular treatments of Jack. Kennedy's script work on Coppola's The Cotton Club (1983-1984) does not treat Diamond but instead Dutch Schultz and Prohibition era ambiance and might be discussed in conjunction with both Kennedy's skill in recreating the era and Doctorow's handling of the Schultz mob. Finally, comparisons might be made between gangster films of the era (Public Enemy, White Heat, Little Caesar, et al.) and their moral perspectives and Legs. One recent film attempting to portray an heroic Prohibition era establishment is Brian dePalma's The Untouchables and offers another interesting contrast.

Literary Precedents

The closest parallel to Kennedy's novel in the manipulation of Prohibition-era historical figures through the fiction is E. L. Doctorow's treatment of Diamond's contemporary and rival, Dutch Schultz in his 1989 work Billy Bathgate. Another recent work, nonfiction, Nicholas Pileggi's Wiseguy, captures the gangster ambiance of Legs without attempting to convey the same sense of style and social malaise that is so important to Kennedy's work. Mario Puzo's The Godfather (1969) and The Sicilian (1984) are more directly relevant to Legs in their treatment of the ethnic and socioeconomic milieus of the 1920s and 1930s. Since Gorman sees it in the context of his own personality, The Great Gatsby (1925) provides another view of the malaise of American society during Prohibition. Perhaps the earliest significant fictional treatment of Prohibition gangsters is W. R. Burnett's Little Caesar, (1929).

Related Titles

The second of Kennedy's published novels (after The Ink Truck, 1969) and first in the early work frequently referred to as the Albany cycle, Legs stands somewhat apart in its use of an historical protagonist moving in a political and social world only occasionally involving Albany. Diamond and Gorman celebrate at the Parody Club and the Rain-Bo room in the Kenmore Hotel, Gorman at Keeler's Men's Bar after Jack's acquittal, Jack recuperates from the fourth assassination attempt at the Albany hospital. But except for Marcus Gorman, who appears in Billy Phelan's Greatest Game (1978) to defend a gambler against a kidnapping charge, none of the named characters recur in other novels in the cycle. Kennedy's collection of essays entitled O Albany! offers the most significant parallel reading to Legs in their discussion of those social and political issues and personalities that are so prominent in the novel. Of particular interest in that collection are two essays "Prohibition: It Can't Happen Here" and "The Death of Legs Diamond."

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