

# Let Me Call You Sweetheart Short Guide

## Let Me Call You Sweetheart by Mary Higgins Clark

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# Characters

It is hard to make generalities about any author's work when that work encompasses more than a dozen books, but for Clark one generalization about her characterizations seems true for most of her fiction: Her characters tends to be rich and beautiful, whether villain or hero. Indeed, wealth defines characters and their value. Throughout *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* the word best means richest.

The "best" social group is composed of the richest people. Best does not mean that the people are moral or even hardworking; villains may be found in the "best" company. Instead, best means the social group most worth being a part of.

Perhaps this element is in Clark's fiction because her audience wants it there; many people like to daydream about a life of wealth with plenty of spare time to hang out with other wealthy people. Even so, this aspect of her characters can be unsettling in a novel that moralizes about women's achievements in the work place and in society as a whole and that suggests that the most worthwhile part of the heroine, Kerry, is her passionately good heart, not her high social standing, the wealth that surrounds her friends, nor her wonderful good looks.

Kerry McGrath is fun company to keep. She may be beautiful, but she does not dwell on her looks very much. Instead, she spends her time thinking about others. Her daughter quite properly takes up much of her thought, but she is not a supermom—she has trouble doing everything for her daughter that she would like to do. Her job as a prosecutor means much to her, and she frankly wants to be a judge, and admits to the appeal of the prestige of a judgeship, yet her actions tell us that both job and prestige come second to her passion for justice. She is no pushover; Reardon's protestations of innocence sound plausible but are weak in light of the evidence against him. Only through conscientious work does she allow herself to be slowly swayed by evidence that Reardon was not the Sweetheart murderer.

A strong heroine needs strong secondary characters to show off her best qualities. As a love interest, Geoff Dorso performs quite well in that capacity. Even though he is handsome, intelligent, passionate about justice, and very nice to Robin, Kerry will not allow her attraction to him to change her thinking; if she believes Reardon, Geoff's client, is guilty, then she will risk her promising relationship with Geoff and leave Reardon in prison. Geoff is a friendly character, but antagonists can help to illuminate a wellrounded protagonist, as well. Jonathan, her supposed protector and friend, is willing to dump her if she becomes a political liability; at the end of chapter 30, he asks the governor to hold back her nomination for judge. This behavior is in contrast to Kerry's determination to do what is right. She pursues the possibility that a convicted murderer may be innocent in spite of what it may cost her at work and politically; she would not do what Jonathan did but would stick to her convictions. Her husband Robert Kinellen lies, is neglectful, and frequently disappoints his daughter Robin, even though she adores him. He will sell out anyone, including Robin, in order to maintain his wealth and social stature. He is the lawyer who is crazed for money; Kerry is the lawyer who craves justice. Dr. Smith, who



loves to create beauty, also wants to dominate it, and have it worship him as its creator. He seems to care nothing for the woman underneath the plastic surgery; the new confidence of Barbara and others he made to look like Suzanne seems to confirm for him his belief that his surgery changed the woman's personality when he changed her looks. Like the mythical sculptor Pygmalion, he loves the beauty he has created. In contrast, Kerry devotes her time to ferreting out people's real motivations; hers is an interest in people's underlying motivations, and when she finds beauty, she wishes to free it.

Let Me Call You Sweetheart has several interesting characters. Perhaps the most interesting of these is Jason Arnott. "Do I think Skip Reardon killed Suzanne? No, I don't, Ms. McGrath, he thought. I think that, like far too many men, Skip might have been capable of murdering his wife."

Why does he not say this aloud? He has much to hide. He is a contradictory personality: He seems to be capable of feeling deeply about art and beautiful objects, yet people do not seem to stir similar feelings. For him, people are curiosities; they are to be occasionally indulged with his help to find rare and beautiful antiques and are to be manipulated in order for him to learn where they keep their most beautiful possessions and for him to learn when would be a good time to burglarize their homes. He is the stickpin in the balloon of the "best" society; of all the people the very rich mingle with, he is the most intelligent, most cultured, and most open-minded—and yet he is a thief.



## Social Concerns

The social concerns of *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* are familiar ones for Mary Higgins Clark, the corrupting qualities of money and power. Kerry's marriage was broken up by her husband's single-minded quest for money and prestige. He left her for the boss's daughter. The two, Kerry and Robert, are contrasted throughout the novel. Kerry has resisted tempting offers to go into private practice because of her commitment to justice—to prosecuting and winning convictions against evildoers, but Robert has eagerly dropped any commitment to justice and has given over most of his career to keeping mobsters such as Weeks out of prison. Kerry's commitment to justice is a sustaining force, an anchor that gives her life meaning outside the home and preventing her from wallowing in self-pity because of her divorce and the difficulty of raising a child alone.

On the other hand, all Robert's money and all of his social standing cannot prevent him from realizing that he has given his great courtroom talents to the service of sleaze balls, and as his career begins to crumble around him he finds himself with little to sustain him—his father-in-law distances himself from him, his wife has a cold personality, and the sleaze balls expect him to break the law to protect them. Robert is reduced to carrying a threat made against his daughter to Kerry. For Robert, the pursuit of wealth and social standing has corrupted him, leaving him without a moral center and with nowhere to turn. For Kerry, the altruistic pursuit of justice, even when it comes to proving a convicted man is actually innocent, has led to respect from her peers, the love of her daughter, the attraction of a handsome defense lawyer, and the certitude that the risks she takes are honorable ones. Her life flourishes.

Another prominent social concern is the mixture of politics and justice. Kerry is associated with powerful people. Her uncle Jonathan is a state senator who could have been governor if he wished. It is he who asks the governor to nominate Kerry to become a judge. Her boss Frank Green is a likely nominee for governor and is continually viewing events from a political perspective—how can he turn an event to his advantage? It is an indication of Clark's skill that he does appear to be a bad man. Most people, when they mention him, think that he is a decent man. Even so, when Kerry looks into the Sweetheart Murder Case, his ambitions are tested because he was the prosecutor in that case. Kerry, idealistic though she is, must continually weigh the political costs of what she does against the demands of justice, and she is suspicious of Green's motives throughout the novel, even though he pursues his duty as he should. Green does what justice requires, even though he is always trying to put a positive political spin on events. The negative publicity from the discovery that he helped put an innocent man in prison may be offset by his helping to free the man and his helping to discover the murderer of a prominent political wife.

Green seems to show how politics and justice can mix without either being compromised, but State Senator Jonathan Hoover has a different view of the problem. For him, his political goals have outweighed justice. He works to do noble deeds in the senate and is proud of his accomplishments on behalf of the state, but Jonathan has compromised justice in order to retain his high social standing and his political power.



He has allowed an innocent man to serve over ten years in prison for a crime Jonathan knows he did not commit. "What did it matter that Reardon was in prison?" he declares.

When Kerry asks him what he wants, Jonathan says, "I want to be president of the senate and friend of the governor. I want to spend my remaining years with my wife, whom I really do love." For the sake of political power more than for the sake of his wife, Jonathan will commit heinous crimes, including murdering ten-year-old Robin.

The issue of women in society is touched on often in the novel. It receives its fullest expression in Kerry, the professional woman who tries to hold a demanding career together while caring for a daughter without a husband's help.

While watching Robin serve at the altar in church she remembers that when she was a girl only boys were allowed to serve at the altar. The situation for women is changing, and just as girls may now serve at the altar, women may be prosecutors and judges. From another direction, the issue of women in society is exemplified by the murder victim Suzanne and by a few of the patients of her father, Dr.

Smith. For them, beauty is everything.

Once a plain girl, Suzanne is made beautiful by surgery, and with the change in her looks her behavior changed. She became more confident and more demanding.

She married a rich construction business owner, had a house built according to her wishes, furnished the house she wanted, and went on spending sprees. Men were at her beck and call, and she had wealth and social standing, but eventually it was not enough. Witnesses recall how she wanted more of everything, but more was never enough; her life appears to have been unfulfilling. Kerry, with her tough job, is a marked contrast; she has built her life not on looks or men but on dedication and commitment to her principles. Hers is the more fulfilling life.

Even so, beauty has its benefits. Barbara, one of Dr. Smith's patients, moves out of a boring dead-end job to an interesting one in New York primarily on the basis of her new, beautiful looks. She moves into an upscale neighborhood, finds upper-class friends, and develops a new, confident personality. For her, hard work has meant nothing without good looks, which would imply that good looks can be a woman's key to social success. It is worth noting that Kerry, too, is a good-looking woman, and her new love, Geoff, is a good-looking man.

# Techniques

The most obvious place to observe Clark's skill is near the ending of *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*. The climax is nicely managed, with every character in precisely the right place at the right time to allow for a rip-roaringly suspenseful unveiling of villains and the saving of Kerry and Robin. Throughout the novel, Clark had been dropping clues, but she had also been subtly developing the theme of obsession. In *Dr. Smith* it was obvious, and he seemed truly insane; but Kerry is obsessive, too. Note how once she has her mind focused on a problem, she will not let it go until she has solved it. She even dreams about it. Robert Kinellen is obsessed with his social position. Jimmy Weeks is obsessed with staying out of prison. Skip Reardon is obsessed with his innocence. Beth is obsessed with Reardon, and so on. Some of the obsessed characters are fine red herrings, destined to lead readers down false paths of guilt or innocence. Alert readers may realize that the line of obsessions leads to the murderer. When the narrative at last brings into focus the murderer's obsession, lurking throughout the novel, the climax seems inevitable, as if there could have been no other solution to the mystery. This is an effect mystery writers strive for; seldom is it as well done as in *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*.

Clark knows her craft, and she includes in her novel all the basics of mysteries.

For instance, the novel has a host of red herrings—characters meant to seem to be the likely murderer in order to mislead readers. For red herrings to function successfully in a novel, they must be plausible candidates for guilt. The red herrings of *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* are plausible, each with a number of clues pointing to his or her guilt. One such red herring, Jason, actually did kill someone, making him a very plausible murderer.

Others have indicated a willingness to kill others, as Weeks has, or have reason to fear or be jealous of Suzanne. For instance, Dr. Smith is a stalker who thinks he somehow owns the women he has made beautiful; it is a short imaginative leap from stalker to murderer. Dr.

Smith's sociopathic personality makes him a likely candidate.

An ideal mystery plays fair with its reader, offering clues at the appropriate times without withholding much for the ending. Many a mystery has been spoiled by the introduction of a character or clue never before hinted in the story right at the end. By and large, Clark plays fair in *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*. She sprinkles hints, beginning with a subtle betrayal, throughout the novel, but she misdirects the clues. The clues are hidden among the red herrings, a good technique to use.

For instance, that antique bracelet certainly points to Jason, but where have we seen it before? Or, for instance, that precision shooting of Dr. Smith certainly points to Weeks, who as a mobster apparently has hit men working for him.



Were that lawyer and accountant killed by professionals? (But, one may ask, who else is skilled with guns? Was that mentioned somewhere early on?) A well-told story can be a delight, and Clark tells this one with skill, playing fair while populating the novel with potential victims and murderers.





# Themes

Underlying much of the novel is the idea of the healing power of love. Poor Reardon, imprisoned for a minimum of thirty years for a crime he did not commit, has his hope sustained in part by Beth, the woman he should have married.

For Kerry, it has been her daughter Robin's love and in turn her love for Robin that has helped her to cope with the feelings of anger and betrayal created by her divorce. Her commitment to Robin's welfare gives her stamina to endure hard work and disappointment. Her growing romance with Geoff Dorso uplifts her spirit and helps her to surmount the anguish of her divorce. When the full extent of Jonathan and Grace's betrayal of her is revealed, she not only has Robin's sustaining love, but Geoff's encouraging love to help her survive and move on.

Beauty is an idea that works its way into all aspects of the plot. Dr. Smith is obsessed with creating and possessing beauty; Jason spends his life taking other people's beautiful possessions so that he may admire them alone. Their contrasting personalities make an interesting contrast in responses to beauty. To a degree, the men have characteristics in common.

Both love beauty; both wish to control and own beauty; both men allow an innocent man to remain in prison when their testimony could get him a new trial.

Dr. Smith lied when he testified at Reardon's trial; Jason did not come forward with what he had witnessed during Suzanne's murder. Yet, Dr. Smith is a thoroughly nasty man, but Jason is likable.

Both have committed evil deeds, yet Jason's obsession with beauty seems childlike, almost an innocent aberration in a sophisticated, thoughtful man. Dr.

Smith is more like a rapist, someone who wants to control beauty, to force it to admire him. Perhaps Jason is a more sympathetic character because he is happy with the superficiality of beauty, even though he is selfish about sharing it.

Other characters want to force beauty to serve them. Jonathan Hoover and Jimmy Weeks try to force Suzanne to become their possession; their downfalls come in part from their unwillingness to leave beauty alone. Further, they are obsessed with a superficiality; underneath her confidence and stunning looks, Suzanne was still a frivolous person with a shallow personality. Her superficial good looks revealed their own superficiality.

One murders her and claims it was for a good cause, thus showing how shallow he and his ambitions are. The other is willing to kill her rather than let another man have her; with that attitude, he cannot have any true understanding of her beauty.



# Key Questions

Let Me Call You Sweetheart touches on themes worthy of discussion, has interesting characters to discuss, and has a solution to its mystery that is likely to energize mystery aficionados. The solution may be the best place to start for a discussion group composed of veteran mystery readers. The solution turns in part on the old, beaten-to-death twist of the good friend turning out to be the deadly enemy. Did the twist in Let Me Call You Sweetheart come unexpectedly, or is it so old a device that it was easily seen coming? Did Clark handle the twist in a clever or original way?

Clark's characters can sometimes seem to be too perfect to live, but the ones in Let Me Call You Sweetheart have their weaknesses. It may seem too much that Kerry is a successful prosecuting attorney, a potential judge, a loving mother, and a good cooker of pasta, but she does seem to have weaknesses, including not being an entirely perfect homebody: She is a poor cook of anything besides pasta.

How realistic are the characters? Why are nearly all of them rich and powerful? Is it hard to care about a woman who has a perfect daughter, all the money she needs, and is intelligent, beautiful, and successful as well?

1. What motivates Kerry to look into the Sweetheart Murder Case? Why does what she sees disturb her in particular as much as it does? After all, the nurse has seen "the look" before and not decided that something must be wrong.
2. Are Dr. Smith's reasons for lying plausible?
3. Why does Clark have someone murder Dr. Smith just before he is going to commit suicide?
4. Why is Jason calm when he is captured?
5. Is Kerry too good to be believable?

Does Clark humanize her?

6. How well is beauty handled in the novel? Is it true that beautiful people get better jobs than other people? How different would the novel be if Suzanne had remained homely Susie? How different would the novel be if Kerry were homely?
7. To fully understand why the novel is written as it is, one should consider the intended audience. What audience is this novel intended to appeal to? What does Clark do to satisfy this audience?
8. Does Clark cheat anywhere in the novel, perhaps by hiding a clue that should have been revealed, or does she play fairly throughout?
9. Are you satisfied with who the murderer of Suzanne turned out to be?



Should it have been someone else?

10. If you were a juror, what would you convict Jason of, in addition to burglary?

Premeditated murder? Manslaughter?

Assault? If you were a judge, what sentence would you pass on Jason? Why?

11. What qualities does Kerry possess that would make her a good judge?

12. Does Kerry do all she should for her daughter?

13. How plausible is the characterization of Robin?

14. How do you account for Robin's affection for her father?

15. Will Kerry's relationship with Geoff cause any problems for her work as a judge?

16. Was having Kerry become a judge the most plausible ending?

17. Is Frank Green a good man or a bad one? Is his putting a positive spin on events a bad trait? Why do people think he would be a good governor? Do they have good reasons? Is he a "stand up guy"?

18. What is the appeal of adventure and skulduggery in the homes of the rich?

19. Could Kerry become like Jonathan?

Doesn't she seem to like prestige, too?

20. What will happen to Robert? With Weeks in prison, what will he do?

## Literary Precedents

Let Me Call You Sweetheart is a modern mystery that borrows from past works but also deviates from traditional patterns. Certainly, one can recognize Conan Doyle's mystery *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901; see separate entry) in *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*. Like the later novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* posits a murder mystery and depends for much of its attraction on prolonged suspense. "How close is Sir Henry to death? What is that howling animal?" These questions are not far from "Is Robin in danger? Who was in that black car while taking photographs?" Each novel employs the technique of building suspense by keeping some of its actors unknown and their potential for harm great without showing where that harm may fall.

Women have long been central figures in novels. Some, like Suzanne, are long on good looks and ill temper, such as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1936; see separate entry). Others have had strong personalities but have found their self-worth in men, such as in *Jane Eyre* (1847; see separate entry). Kerry McGrath is a 1990s American, born into money like many a past heroine who is threatened by men, but she makes her own life. Throughout *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, the significant contrast to mysteries of earlier eras is that Kerry's self-worth depends on her own deeds, not on men's appreciation of them, and although relationships are important to *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, Kerry's fulfillment comes through her work and her proven ability to support her child on her own.



## Related Titles

Clark carved a niche for herself in mystery writing with her first novel, *Where Are the Children?* (1975; see separate entry). It features a heroine, Nancy Eldredge, who with pluck, determination, and intelligence survives a tale in which anyone could be her enemy. Even in this early effort, Clark's skill at creating wellrounded protagonists is evident in the characterization of Nancy Eldredge, who, like Kerry, seems like a person taken from life and placed in a novel.

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