Magic Hour Short Guide

Magic Hour by Susan Isaacs

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Magic Hour is the first of Isaacs's novels with a male protagonist. Steve Brady is a credible and complex policeman whose internal struggles are revealed while he carries out a demanding job. Although the story provides more inner conflict and family background than the usual fictional police detective, he nevertheless comes across as an officer one might meet in the streets or coffee shops of Long Island.

Unlike Isaacs's female protagonists, Steve does not carry the weight of proving himself at skills or ventures usually reserved for the opposite sex. Instead, Steve's acts include two very subtle forms of gender-role bending by the author. He is the one who has to follow his heart in order to make things right—a leap of faith which is more often the province of female characters. And in doing so, he also accomplishes the not-inconsiderable task of personal growth as a middle-aged man. Such a happening is far from impossible in real life, but for complex reasons it is seldom seen in popular fiction.

Bonnie Spencer, the woman he falls in love with, is an equally interesting character. She resembles the heroines of Isaacs's other novels in some ways; she is Jewish, intelligent, venturesome, and artistic. But Bonnie's life did not follow the smooth path of a suburban wife. In earlier years she had some triumphs; she sold a screenplay and married a rising producer. But when Sy divorced her she was left bereft of money and of a supportive social circle. Her courage and cheer under pressure impresses Steve as much, perhaps, as the allure of her silken skin. Bonnie grew up in the Western mountains where she learned outdoor talents. She can tie trout flies and is an excellent shot—a skill that is almost her undoing.

The cast of the movie Sy Spencer was shooting are recognizable Hollywood types, with some depth added: Lindsay Keefe, the gorgeous and completely self-absorbed actress; Nick Monteleone, the handsome but clumsy leading man who needs stand-ins for all his action scenes; Victor Santana, the smooth director who moves in on Lindsay behind Sy's back—all come across as somewhat more than stereotypes. And Sy himself, who dies on the novel's first page but then becomes a vivid character as Steve conducts his investigation, is the most complicated of all of them.

Other characters include Steve's mother and his brother Easton, his fiancee Lynne who represents his long-delayed chance at "a normal life," and several of Steve's fellow officers. All are drawn in sufficient detail for the reader to feel they are real people.

Social Concerns

Magic Hour tracks Long Island police lieutenant Stephen Edward Brady as he seeks the killer of movie mogul Sy Spencer. Aside from Steve's profession, it is as far from the usual police procedural as a novel with a mystery plot can be.

Steve Brady himself has a collection of partially healed neuroses. A veteran of Vietnam, he spent fourteen years in the Suffolk County Police Department before he drunkenly took a shot at a fellow officer's side mirror. The department sent him to a tony treatment center and took him back afterwards, but he had to start at the bottom of the ranks again. As the book opens, Steve is a reasonably stable and happy man. But he does not clearly remember a stretch of many months of his past, a blur of endless drinks and casual pick-ups. This becomes significant later in the story as his relationship with Bonnie, the prime suspect, develops.

His year in Vietnam, with its horrors and drug addiction, has surely affected his later life, though his alcoholism and recovery are a still larger influence. In both experiences, Steve mirrors the concerns of large numbers of Americans. Vietnam was the first war whose traumas were widely recognized as affecting lives for years afterward. Addictions and their treatment have also been one of the "growth industries" since the 1980s.

Previously hidden problems are now admitted, examined, and sometimes invoked as the sole cause of unhappiness.

Yet his identity as a recovering alcoholic gives resonance to his character. Overcoming such a problem shows inner strength to many readers.

The other social motif winding through Magic Hour might be called: "lifestyles of the rich and famous." Although Steve himself and his fellow officers are from modest backgrounds, most of the suspects come from the fabled world of Hollywood. Sy's friend Mikey LoTriglio has likely Mafia connections. Steve's own mother and brother have made pathetic efforts to be accepted by inhabitants of the nearby Fashionable Hamptons. The lavish lifestyles shown in Magic Hour draw on a perennial fascination with wealth, power, and fame. It may have even been heightened during the "go-go eighties."

Certainly, Judith Krantz's works and other "glitz" novels set in this milieu have been very successful.

Yet Susan Isaacs's approach is more one of "counter-glitz." Sy, seemingly a man with a golden touch whom everybody likes, is revealed to have had his dark and ruthless side. In fact, despite their surface glamour, all the wealthy characters in the book guard more uneasy secrets than the ordinary people do. This provides a vicarious glimpse into wealthy settings with only the minimum of accompanying envy.

Techniques

Magic Hour is narrated in first person by its central character. His observations and movements are studded with brisk dialogue as he interviews various suspects and otherwise goes about his business.

Although his conversation lacks the snappy humor that some of Isaacs's heroines show, there are many references to movies, fast-food chains, and other features of popular culture.

In the love story, the two bedroom scenes are only slightly explicit, but they are framed in a setting of time and light that transforms raw passion into romance. The novel's tide comes from this same hour, also a cinematic term, the time just after dawn or before dusk when light can do amazing things.

Themes

The external plot of Magic Hour involves solving a murder, but the internal plot interwoven with it is a love story.

The love story carries the major theme.

"Follow your heart" is an unexceptional theme for love stories, but in Steve Brady's case, it is more a matter of "Follow your obsession." As he investigates the murder, the evidence against Bonnie Bernstein Spencer, the mogul's ex-wife, piles up. At the same time, Steve is becoming obsessed with her, not in the classic way of a detective obsessed with trapping his prey, but in the woozy way of a man falling in love against all logic.

When the police are ready to take her in, he cannot stand it. He hides her.

It is a stupid and impulsive act by normal standards. In his past, following his impulses has led to destructive behavior.

Steve himself is half convinced of her guilt at this point. What can lead him to jeopardize his police career and his engagement, for a woman who may be a murderer, and admittedly went back to bed with her ex-husband just a few days ago? Steve still cannot believe that such a warm and vulnerable and affectionate woman could really be a killer. And he suddenly sees a future without Bonnie looming ahead of him, bleak and meaningless.

In the event, Steve's trust is justified.

Not only is Bonnie innocent, but as they talk about how to clear her, she provides the vital clue which leads to the real murderer. All the time he hides her, Steve knows it is only a temporary solution.

Duty still has its hold on him; he has to solve the killing soon or both of them will pay for his impulsive act. This is the parallel theme to the major one: following one's heart does not mean duty can be tossed aside. When Steve goes to arrest Sy's murderer, we see how far his sense of duty goes.

A minor theme is that one reaps what one sows. It comes out most strongly in the manner of Sy's death; his own solution to his problems backfires.

Key Questions

In her focus on ordinary people caught in extraordinary situations—and coming out ahead— Isaacs's novels present a generally optimistic view of life. She is also a sharp observer of contemporary mores and typical problems of an era.

For this reason the books hold up a provocative mirror to each of the decades that they're set in, as well as to concerns in some readers' lives.

1. Detective Steve Brady in Magic Hour is engaged to a genuinely nice woman and seems finally ready for a stable, normal life. Yet it is right at this time that he becomes obsessed with Bonnie Spencer, a murder suspect with a number of destabilizing traits in her background. Is this simply fate or serendipity at work?

Or are there other reasons for his attraction to Bonnie?

2. The main female characters in Magic Hour and After All These Years, both in their late forties, find new love. The motifs appeal to the large audience of baby-boomer women readers seems obvious. Yet statistics show that most divorcees in this age group will not remarry. And survey research shows that many of them don't even want to remarry. How do you recognize or interpret these various facts?

3. Isaacs's success with her novels has not been repeated in her movie-related projects. Is she just the victim of bad luck on the latter? Or are there crucial elements in her fiction that do not translate well to the screen?

4. Isaacs's novels have been grand commercial successes. Critics tend to disparage Isaacs as just an author of popular tales with pretensions to being a serious writer. Does it matter where a novel falls on the continuum between "formula fiction" and "real literature"?

Where would you place Isaacs's works on this scale?

Literary Precedents

Like most of Isaacs's novels, Magic Hour draws from more than one genre.

The mystery plot seems a natural forte for this author, but she almost always integrates another major plot strand and theme beyond the usual one of bringing a criminal to justice. The fact that her books are published as "mainstream," and more often than not make the best-seller list, testifies to the success of this approach in her hands.

The novel's debt to the mystery genre is obvious. An equally strong connection, although probably less overt, is to the romantic suspense genre. Like the protagonists of gothic novels from Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847; see separate entry) on, Steve has to deal with attraction to a possibly dangerous potential lover. Another classic of romantic suspense, Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca (1938; see separate entry), features the post-death revelation of character, like that of Sy Spencer in this novel.

Related Titles

In combining detection with a happilyending love story, Magic Hour resembles After All These Years (1993; see separate entry). One of the interesting sidelights on the parallel plots is the centrality of the love theme in Magic Hour, compared to the minor part it plays in the later novel. Bonnie comes to represent the choice between sunshine and gloom for the rest of Steve's life. Tom Driscoll in After All These Years is a nice-but-optional bonus; a reward won by Rosie for her daring deeds much as medieval knights won a fair maiden's hand. Whether the difference is just a playful Isaacs twist, or whether it is a hidden message about the needs of the two sexes, is up to the reader to say.

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