The Man with a Load of Mischief Short Guide

The Man with a Load of Mischief by Martha Grimes

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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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Characters

Richard Jury, the detective in all of Grimes's novels, is unusual among most traditional fictional detectives: He is a detective by profession rather than a talented amateur. At the beginning of the series, Jury is detective chief inspector at Scotland Yard, but later receives a long overdue promotion to superintendent. Tall and handsome, Jury is a brilliant detective who is distinguished by his warmth, humor, and compassion. He has little patience with the "by the book" approach of his superior, Racer, who frequently lectures to Jury on what he perceives as Jury's shortcomings, which ironically include Jury's popularity among his subordinates. Jury accuses himself of being a melancholic: He loves winter and rain and is attracted to women who have an air of sadness. The sadness in Jury's own life is the result of the deaths of his parents when he was very young — his mother died in an air raid which he survived — and his subsequent failure to find a permanent home.

Jury has not one but two Dr. Watsons to assist him. His professional assistant, Detective Sergeant Alfred Wiggins, is one of the comical characters in the series. A young man, his chief characteristic is his hypochondria, which both Jury and the reader find humorous although it sometimes annoys Jury. Wiggins, appearances to the contrary, is a valuable assistant because of his exhaustive note-taking. He is not particularly intelligent or perceptive, but occasionally he surprises everyone with unexpected knowledge or insight.

Jury's unofficial assistant, Melrose Plant, is Wiggins's opposite in temperament and background. He, like Jury, is in his early forties, and he lives in Long Piddleton, Northamptonshire, setting of The Man with a Load of Mischief; he and Jury first meet when Jury arrives in Long Piddleton to solve a series of murders. He is rich, handsome, unmarried, and titled, although he prefers not to use his titles, which includes Earl of Caverness; he is also intelligent and well-educated, lecturing in French literature at the University of London for a few months each year.

His aunt by marriage and only living relative, Agatha, appears in many of the novels to plague her nephew, whose home, Ardry End, she covets along with his other possessions.

Greedy, bossy, and opinionated, the American Agatha is another comic character.

A number of the other inhabitants of Long Piddleton make brief appearances throughout the series or at least are mentioned by the main characters.

Grimes also makes frequent use of various detective writers as characters; detective writers appear quite frequently in the works of writers to whom Grimes is usually compared.

Since pubs are a central part of the settings, pub owners and customers figure in each of the novels. In The Man With a Load of Mischief, a number of minor characters who

frequent the pub to which the title refers are introduced, and many of them make appearances throughout the series.

Social Concerns

Many detective novels ignore issues such as responsibility and justice; solving the puzzle is sufficient for the detective and those around him. When the detective is as intelligent and sensitive as Richard Jury, however, the solution of the mystery is no cause for celebration and self-congratulation. In fact, Grimes never has Jury reveal the murderer's identity in one of those familiar scenes in which all the suspects are gathered together to hear him say, "The reason I called you all here is . . . ." Murder does not make Jury happy, even when the murderer is brought to justice.

Justice is an important issue in the novels, as Jury's very name suggests.

He explicitly states his own concern with justice at the end of the second Jury novel, The Old Fox Deceiv'd (1982).

Jury wonders aloud whether his is a "false vocation," for he sees the murderer in the novel, who has just committed suicide, as being a victim, too.

As a policeman, he says, he should not concern himself with justice, but only "collar them and bring them in." In this case and others, however, he has not brought the murderer in; suicide in some of the novels and accidental death in others serve the cause of justice in place of trials. Jury, therefore, sees himself as the "jury" by which the murderers are tried, for his discovery of their identities generally leads directly or indirectly to the murderers' own deaths.

Other issues of people's responsibility for each other appear throughout the series. In Help the Poor Struggler (1985), one of the local policemen calls Jury a "minder" because of his tendency to look out for the weak. Mrs. Wasserman, Jury's London neighbor, is one of these "frails." A concentration camp survivor, Mrs. Wasserman is constantly afraid that she is being followed by a man who is trying to harm her, and she is pitifully grateful for Jury's efforts to make her feel safe.

Jury also protects those for whom he feels little affection, such as the cousin and her family who are his only living relations, because of his sense of duty.

Finally, at the end of each novel, Jury concerns himself with what will happen to those he has met during the investigation. In The Man with a Load of Mischief, he helps someone who worked for the murderer and is deprived of her job, because of her employer's arrest, to find an even better job. Melrose Plant, who shares Jury's sense of social responsibility, takes charge of the murderer's abandoned dog.

Techniques

Grimes, who has taught courses in detective fiction at Johns Hopkins University, displays an awareness of the conventions of detective fiction but seems to consciously work around its usual weaknesses. In the character of Richard Jury, Grimes skillfully handles the problems of characterization of a fictional detective, who must be morally and intellectually superior without becoming an inhuman paragon. Jury is not only believable and admirable, but also likable, primarily because of Grimes's focus on his emotions. He is thoroughly professional but is unable to avoid personal reactions; once, for example, when Agatha interferes with his examination of the scene of a murder, he loses his customary patience and yells to Wiggins to handcuff her (much to Wiggins's surprise for he, as Jury knows, never carries handcuffs).

Readers of detective fiction are always concerned with whether an author has "played fair" with them: that is, whether the author provides them with all the information they need to solve the mystery themselves, along with, of course, "red herrings" or false clues. The technical problem for the writer is that he or she must provide this information without making the murderer's identity obvious too early in the novel. Grimes handles this problem by emphasizing red herrings and playing down real clues. More than once she uses the technique of confused identity, most prominently in Jerusalem Inn (1984), including a twist on the convention of having a murderer fake an attempt on his or her own life to divert suspicion.

Grimes maintains suspense by having multiple murders in the novels.

Having a series of murders allows her to plant more clues, false and real, and to confuse the reader by the lack of apparent relationship among the murders. Often the serial murders lead the characters, and perhaps the reader, to attribute them to a homicidal maniac, but only one of the murderers is mentally disturbed and even that one does not choose victims randomly.

Grimes's scholarly background in literature seems to have helped to develop her technical skill. Readers who have admired her effective use of imagery would not be surprised to learn that she has written poetry in addition to detective fiction.

Themes

Despite the concern that Jury and Plant have for others, the characters are generally as alienated as any in the serious fiction of the twentieth century.

On a literal level, the recurring characters have few if any relatives; Jury, Plant, and Wiggins are all bachelors, and although each novel includes romantic interests for Jury and Plant (often, as in this novel, the same woman, Vivian Rivington), something always interferes with the progress of the romance. Even characters who have family and friends, however, often seem uncaring at best and murderous at worst. More than one murder victim's family is concerned with little more than the inconvenience the death causes them: In fact, Grimes depicts many of the worst human traits, and a tone of despair pervades the work. In this novel, Vivian Rivington discovers that she has been cruelly deceived by the people she was closest to because of their greed for her money. The novel has moments of humor, but the view of life that emerges is dark.

Key Questions

Grimes's novels are interesting to compare to each other and to those of other detective novelists. In The Man With a Load of Mischief, the first in the series, she establishes the formula for her subsequent novels. Throughout the series, her skills as a novelist grow and her characters change. A discussion group might explore the progression of the author and her characters from this first novel to later novels.

Fans of detective fiction tend to be fiercely loyal to their favorite authors, so discussions and probably arguments might center on comparisons between Grimes and other detective novelists.

Of particular interest might be discussions which compare Grimes to current writers who are working in the same tradition. Two such writers are Elizabeth George and P. D. James. George, like Grimes, an American who sets her novels in England, has written seven novels featuring a New Scotland Yard detective who is an aristocrat. She is frequently compared to James, an Englishwoman whose twelve detective novels usually have as their major character a New Scotland Yard detective, also a published poet.

Grimes's novels also include information on matters ranging from pub names to Elizabethan theater to rock and roll guitarists. These details along with the English settings, humor, and memorable characters lead to pleasurable reading and discussion.

1. Several reviews of this novel praised elements such as characterization while criticizing its plot. Do you agree that the plot is a problem?

2. Does the humor detract from the seriousness of the social concerns and the murders of five people?

3. What "red herrings" does Grimes employ to sustain the mystery?

4. In this novel we see the beginning of the friendship, almost partnership, of Richard Jury and Melrose Plant.

What do the detective and the aristocratic French poetry professor have in common?

5. Grimes, an American, sets this novel in England. How successful is she in creating English characters, dialogue, and settings?

6. One of the interesting aspects of Melrose Plant's character is his giving up of his title. What seems to have motivated him?

7. Food and drink details are provided throughout the novel. Are they distracting, or do they serve any useful purpose?

8. Grimes in this novel has a subplot involving questionable authorship, a subject she returns to in The Horse You Came In On. How is this subplot related to the main plot?

9. In addition to Jury, are any of the other characters' names suggestive of a particular meaning?

10. A number of the characters are keeping secrets, most of which prove to be unrelated to the murders. How does the keeping of these secrets affect the plot?

Literary Precedents

Grimes is often compared to Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Ngaio Marsh, all writers of a type of detective fiction known as the novel of detection, which flourished in the 1930s. The focus of novels of detection is the development of characters, and humor often appears.

Christie's influence on Grimes's work is most apparent in the settings.

Christie generally set her novels in small British villages not unlike Grimes's fictitious Long Piddleton; these settings create the novels' atmosphere and have technical advantages such as limiting the number of possible suspects.

Sayers also occasionally used a village setting, but Grimes seems to owe more to Sayers's characterization than to her settings. Sayers's detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, is more fully developed than Christie's rather flat detectives, whose personalities sometimes seem to consist of one or two eccentricities.

Grimes also develops the character of her detective as well as hinting at the complex nature of characters too minor to be fully developed. Jury, like Wimsey, is concerned with moral issues rather than viewing detection as merely an intellectual puzzle. Finally, the relationship of Jury and Plant is similar to that of Wimsey and Charles Parker, a policeman, although Grimes reverses the positions of policeman and amateur. Perhaps Grimes learned from Sayers how convenient it is to have someone with a title and money involved in a murder investigation; policemen, for example, are not supposed to buy information and are not usually in a financial position to do so, but Wimsey and Plant are free to.

Marsh's Rory Alleyn, also of Scotland Yard, is, however, the character Jury most closely resembles. In many novels of detection, humor arises from the ineptitude of the professional detectives; beginning with Sherlock Holmes, the brilliant amateur has generally triumphed over the bumbling professional. Alleyn and Jury, although their backgrounds are different, share enough qualities that they provoke the same reaction from new acquaintances: "You don't look like a policeman."

Although Grimes's novels clearly follow the basic formula of the novel of detection, they are fresh, distinctive additions to the genre. Most of her predecessors are unable to handle all of the elements of fiction equally well — Marsh's plots, for example, are often weak — but Grimes's novels show skill in all areas. Grimes has also been compared to Charles Dickens in her creation of characters and atmosphere.

Related Titles

The novels which follow The Man with a Load of Mischief have a number of elements in common. First, many of the same characters appear in the novels, and others are at least mentioned in subsequent novels. Also, the settings provide unity; all the novels involve the pubs for which they are named, with Long Piddleton, the setting of the first novel, serving as a kind of base because Plant lives there and London as another base because Jury and Scotland Yard are there. Winter, Jury's favorite season, is the time of year in most of the novels, and more than one is set at Christmas.

The murders throughout the novels are similar as well. All include multiple murders which at first seem unrelated. In discovering their relationship, which often involves events in the distant past, Jury discovers their motivation and therefore the murderer. The philosophy of murder which Jury states in The Old Fox Deceiv'd is apparent in the entire series: Murder, he says, takes place in the past because the murderer really meant to kill someone long ago and has carried that feeling with him for many years. In The Anodyne Necklace (1983), one of Grimes's personal favorites, for example, Jury is confronted with the brutal beating of a young girl, poison pen letters, the murder of a stranger to the village and of one of its inhabitants, and the attempted murder of a child; the key to the mystery turns out to be the theft in the past of a valuable emerald necklace, although both the thief and his victim are dead as the novel begins. In Help the Poor Struggler, the inhabitants of several neighboring villages believe that a maniac is murdering children at random, until Jury discovers that the murders are the result of another murder twenty years before.

The Old Contemptibles (1991) and The Horse You Came In On (1993; please see separate entries) are also Jury novels.

Others include The Deer Leap (1985), 7 Am the Only Running Footman (1986), The Five Bells and Bladebone (1987), The Old Silent (1989), and Rainbow's End (1995).

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