Maximum Bob Short Guide

Maximum Bob by Elmore Leonard

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Characters

As in other Leonard novels, assorted grotesques abound in Maximum Bob, among them: the extended Crowe family of petty and not so petty criminals; alcoholic dermatologist Dr.

Tommy Vasco, whose Community Control anklet restricts him to his oceanfront mansion; and Leanne Gibbs, the Palm Beach County judge's wife, a former underwater dancing mermaid and a spiritualist with a dual personality, her second half a twelve-year-old 1850s slave who sounds like Butterfly McQueen in Gone with the Wind.

The major character, however, is thoroughly normal. Miami born Kathy Diaz Baker, a Palm Beach County probation officer who narrates most of the novel, is twenty-seven years old and has been on the job for two years. Two of her brothers are cops, and her father was a Miami policeman until he was shot and had to retire on disability.

Says Judge Gibbs: "I'd call that a law enforcement family." She envies her brothers: "You go after offenders you know are dirty, get a conviction and have a sense of accomplishment, huh?

You've done something." What does she do? "Paperwork. I check up on people who wish I'd leave them alone and then I fill out forms. I don't get anything out of it because I never finish. It's always the same losers, one after another." She actually spends much of her time in a second hand, faded beige VW with 78,746 miles on its odometer, tracking down one of her seventy plus probationers, such as Dale Crowe, and having to deal not only with him but also with his derelict friends and family — most of whom are incorrigible repeat offenders. Before becoming a probation officer, she worked at a mental health clinic with drug abusers and alcoholics, experience useful in her present position, which she takes seriously, pursuing her charges energetically and fearlessly, even risking her life. Carefully honed people skills help her fend off potential violators, such as Bob Gibbs and Elvin Crowe, while maintaining relationships with them that her job requires. She also gains the confidence of such disparate people as the crackhead Earleane and spiritualist Leanne. Her measured, subversive courting of Sergeant Gary Hammond is another example of the people handling skills. She also has analytical, crime-solving ability, working with Hammond to solve a case that baffles everyone else. Above all, she is a survivor, bouncing back from a failed marriage (which, she explains, is how an obvious Hispanic like her got the name Baker); coping with the death of the man she was determined would be her second husband; and conspiring with the judge, her would-be seducer, to shield his strange wife from public ridicule.

Sergeant Gary Hammond is the other thoroughly good and perfectly normal character in the novel. Baker sizes him up early on: "She had a feeling he didn't drink or smoke and went to a Protestant church on Sunday. But a neat-looking guy, lean build, no ring.

White button-down shirt and print burgundy necktie, very nice. . . . He looked more like a lawyer than a guy in law enforcement. Mid-thirties, say, but no ring." A good

investigator, he notices details and rapidly draws logical conclusions from them. His only apparent flaw, as far as his boss is concerned, is that he wears his hair too long. Finally bowing to an order from this superior, he is killed by Elvin Crowe while getting a haircut, "dead with his gun in his hand. Never fired, the paper said." Not long before, Hammond had warned Crowe: "If I pull it, shoot it. You understand?" Baker recalls: "That was the trouble. He did understand. He would know enough to walk in and start talking and Gary would think, oh no, have to sit here and listen to this guy and his bullshit, trapped, and Elvin would have him off guard, the nice guy putting up with him."

Almost everyone seems to put up with Maximum Bob, who got his nickname as a result of a Newsweek cover story about courts getting tough on drug traffickers: "Yeah, what they did, they made a big to-do over my giving a drug dealer thirty years, plus a twohundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar fine, when the state attorney was willing to let him off with probation."

Called "Big" because at election times his signs read "THINK BIG," Bob Isom Gibbs is "about fifty-seven with a solemn, bony face, dark hair combed flat to his head. Maybe too dark." When she first comes across him in court, Baker sees a "little bigot with his solemn face and dyed hair." Without his robes, in his chambers, he looks like a "farmer or an Okeechobee fishing guide dressed for town." A jurist who trades lenient sentences for certain services, his hanging judge reputation has left many people with grudges against him. Further complicating his life is his predilection for young women, and after his most recent girlfriend moves on, he sets his sights on Baker, who has been forewarned and succeeds in holding him at bay while retaining his good will. Having tired of his second wife Leanne's dual personality and seances, he determines to get rid of her. Aware of her fear of alligators, he concocts a plot (by bribing one of his former defendants) to have an alligator show up at their house. This is enough to send Leanne packing, but because he gets nowhere with Baker, he has to rely upon assorted pick-ups at a local watering place. Reading about the attempts on his life, Leanne returns home, and at the end of the novel, a stymied but unchanged Gibbs again is saddled with her.

Social Concerns

Judge Bob Isom Gibbs' peers in the Criminal Division of Palm Beach County Circuit Court have censured his courtroom conduct, and law enforce ment people who deal with him know he is corrupt to the core, personally as well as professionally. But he gives offenders sentences they deserve, has sent more men to death row than any other judge in Florida, and handily wins reelection. Through his portrait of Maximum Bob, Elmore Leonard vividly dramatizes problems with the judicial system, or at least a portion of it. At the same time, he presents a group of dedicated, capable, and honest policemen, assistant district attorneys, and probation officers, many of them young and female, who seem to be fighting a losing battle on two fronts, against flawed officialdom and offenders who cannot be rehabilitated. Leonard does not betray any compassion for the low-life offenders, and they themselves do not seem to bemoan their fate; but the portraits of these people and the dreadful lives they lead also suggest that the author perceives a major flaw in the American social fabric, or at the very least in that of Florida.

Techniques

A major portion of the action is seen through the eyes of Kathy Diaz Baker, but as he does elsewhere, Leonard in this novel also has other characters function as narrators for a time. The effect, again, is that various figures are developed more fully than they otherwise would have been. Briefly, in a curious turn, Leonard relates a portion of an episode from the point of view of an alligator. Also, as in other books, the dialogue carries much of the burden for plot advancement and character development. Because the characters come from varied backgrounds, their speech patterns differ considerably, so Leonard's keen ear for the nuances of dialects and regionalisms enhances the believability of characters and the overall realism.

Themes

At the end of Maximum Bob,a model policeman is dead, a superb probation officer is quitting her job, and a bad judge remains on the bench, apparently more secure than ever. The forces of good, it appears, are overcome. The family of criminals on whom Leonard focuses, some petty thugs and others murderers, have lived their dreadful way of life for generations, and spells of incarceration have hardened and further criminalized them. Sadly, they and others like them seem not likely to be redeemed, despite the efforts of such well-meaning professionals as Kathy Diaz Baker and her probation office colleagues. While a reader may be moved to wonder where or upon whom blame should be placed, Leonard does not confront the issue, except perhaps obliquely. His evil-doers are at the two extremes of the economic spectrum, the haves and the have nots; too little or too much could cause problems, he may be suggesting. But since he presents only a small part of the total social spectrum — law enforcers and lawbreakers in one region of Florida — there is no indication of how society at large is affected by, or reacts to, the bleak picture he presents, or even if it cares.

Key Questions

Although it is not necessarily a novel about the courts and law enforcement, Maximum Bob deals in detail with both, and Leonard did his usual research before writing the book. To test the author's accuracy or veracity in characterization and background, discussants may want to consider recent news stories and magazine articles about the criminal justice system and probation practices.

1. Judge Gibbs objects to being "accused of throwing the book at defendants," wonders "What is the book for if you don't go by it and, yes, occasionally throw it at a criminal offender," and rejects pleas of leniency ("I send people to prison when they kill somebody. I see that as my job"). Does all of this make him a bad judge?

2. A reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement (London) criticized Leonard for turning the Crowe clan "into a freak-show for the amusement of those who are better off." Is this a fair criticism of Maximum Bob?

3. Another English reviewer, in the London Review of Books, wrote: "In its popularity, Leonard's fiction answers to a widely-held sense of hopelessness about the bad guys." Is this an accurate assessment? Can it be applied to Maximum Bob?

4. Does Leonard show any compassion for the Crowes or indicate that he cares for them at all? Should he?

5. Because Leonard uses multiple narrative points of view, a substantial part of the novel is narrated by Elvin Crowe. Does this greater insight make him come across more or less favorably? Why?

6. In the course of his background research for this book, Leonard learned that 80% of Florida's probation officers are women in their twenties. He told an interviewer: "It's incredible that so many little girls are dealing with these criminal felons." How well are these "little girls" (Baker included) doing?

7. Based on Leonard's portrayal of it, how well is the probation system working? Are there any structural or institutional flaws?

8. How realistic is Judge Gibbs's courtroom? Before writing the novel, Leonard talked with judges, probation officers, and other officials in Palm Beach County, and for some years corresponded with a local criminal court judge, Marvin Mounts (to whom Maximum Bob is dedicated).

9. What does the story line involving Leanne Gibbs (which Leonard develops in detail) add to the overall plot?

Should it have been presented more briefly? Is it credible?

10. Humor is a standard element in Leonard novels. What humor is there in this one?

Literary Precedents

Gold Coast (1980) was Leonard's first novel with a south Florida setting, an area that already was the province of John D. Macdonald, creator of the popular Travis McGee mysteries. Both writers use the local milieu more substantively than just for backdrop, and though this novel does not have a heroic McGee type to right all wrongs, Baker and Hammond jointly play the role.

Related Titles

In Maximum Bob there are many echoes of previous Leonard novels, partly because since Gold Coast he has set a number of his plots in Florida, including Split Images (1981), Cat Chaser (1982), and LaBrava (1983). In Split Images, Robbie Daniels, like Dr. Tommy Vasco in Maximum Bob, is a millionaire who lives in a Palm Beach oceanfront estate and has a penchant for luxury automobiles. Vasco's houseman, Hector, recalls Woodrow Ricks' servant and jack of all trades Donnell Lewis in Freaky Deaky (1988) and Cornell Lewis in Stick (1983). Baker and Hammond are patterned after many dedicated and righteous law enforcers in earlier novels. Alcoholics and drug addicts also are frequent Leonard character types, so Dr. Tommy, Hector, Elvin, and Earlene have as predecessors such people as Jack Ryan and Denise Leary in Unknown Man No. 89 (1977) and Skip Gibbs and Woodrow Ricks of Freaky Deaky.

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