Meeting Evil Short Guide

Meeting Evil by Thomas Berger

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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

Berger's economical novel depends mainly on its two chief figures, Richie Maranville, the serial killer who hates bad manners, and the suburban innocent, John Felton. To be sure, Berger's deft narrative often suggests more about his minor characters than the author has time to allot them. Except for Sharon and Tim, a young woman and a boy who barely escape Richie's malice, the other characters are essentially reduced to cameo appearances.

For instance, John's wife is brought on stage in the final scenes of the story, and other minor characters have a memorable moment or two, The most memorable figure in the novel is Richie, who may well be one of the most credible serial killers portrayed in contemporary American fiction. The product of an orphanage and a series of psychiatric clinics, Richie has developed a survivalist's contempt for institutions and social authority. He views the police, the most obvious symbols of social authority, with contempt; but he reserves his greatest ire for the citizens who regularly display incivility to strangers. Equally disgusting to him are the people who practice unthinkingly the daily rituals of social hypocrisy: When a motel manager rents a room with second rate accommodations, Richie responds by urinating on one of the twin beds of his room, and later by murdering a fellow guest, depositing the body in his room and then setting the room on fire. Richie also considers taking punitive action against a waitress who is overweight (she has no discipline and eats too much of the restaurant's food) and who offers the usual banal pleasantries after his meal.

The greatest irony of Richie's character is that Richie kills because of a twisted idealism: Society's lack of attention to its professed ideals and beliefs infuriates him. For the same reason, he conceives and persists in holding an irrational affection for John Felton, whom he perceives as a quixotic idealist who is constantly victimized by the selfishness of strangers. His admiration for John gives Richie a tragic stature, but it ultimately proves his undoing, because Richie's decision to visit John's house and meet his wife and daughter energizes John into a violent defense of his home and family.

By contrast, John, through much of the novel, seems an annoying figure.

Unlike the streetwise Sharon, who immediately recognizes Richie's type, John misunderstands Richie's nature for nearly half the book. As a consequence, he is baffled by the reactions of strangers who express hatred and contempt when they meet him, for they mistakenly believe that John is the perpetrator of Richie's crimes. Since most readers will conclude — well ahead of John — that Richie has committed some horrendous acts, they are likely to be impatient with John, who lacks the shrewdness of Berger's Jack Crabb, or even the hard-won wisdom of the mature Reinhart. However, Berger develops the theme of John's innocence so emphatically in order to emphasize basic goodness of heart — and to remind his readers of how logical John's views would be if modern America were a more civil and peaceable kingdom.

In the final sequence of the novel, when John defeats Richie, in order to save his wife and daughter from Richie's potential for malice, Berger demonstrates once again his faith in the potential heroism of the ordinary human.

Like the mature Reinhart, the enlightened Fred Wagner and the perceptive Lydia in his later novels, John displays his ability to survive the ordeal of initiation into an awareness of evil.

Social Concerns

One of the obvious concerns of Meeting Evil is the novel's attempt to deal with the apparently random violence that has afflicted American society in the 1980s and 1990s. In the novel, John Felton, a young married man and real estate agent, naively helps a man who stops at his house and requests a push for his car. When John accompanies Richie to a gas station and becomes embroiled in a series of bizarre incidents, he finally comes to realize that he has become entangled with a serial killer.

Another social interest of the novel is Berger's attempt to explore the character and effect on a community of a serial killer on a spree. Richie Maranville, the murderer, seems at first an innocuous and almost anonymous figure, yet he is eventually revealed as a murderer who has cut the throats of two women because of trivial provocations, and is clearly an explosive menace ready to kill anyone who strikes him as morally slack or lacking in manners.

The portrait of Richie, which is drawn with irony and restraint, is developed with a deliberate lack of melodrama and sensationalism. At times, Richie seems far more sympathetic than his victims or the police and citizens who react to his crimes. Yet Richie's actions and bizarre reasoning can be viewed as thoroughly credible, given his premises and estrangement from the normal concerns of human life.

Another element of social criticism in the novel is the essential innocence and naivete of Berger's hero, John Felton: John fails to perceive that Richie is dangerous for much of the book, and even when realization dawns, he has difficulty recognizing that Richie is a killer, rather than merely an eccentric stranger. Yet John, who is lauded as a hero for actions taken on the basis of common sense and the need to survive, does rise to a heroic level in the final scenes of the novel, when he saves his wife and daughter from Maranville after the latter has come to the Felton home on a whim.

Techniques

Berger employs a very spare and economical narrative style and technique in Meeting Evil. The effect attained is that of a fast moving suspense or crime story, which also carries something of the moral weight of a fable. Moreover, the time sequence is restricted to a single day in John Felton's life, although it is a span of time which decisively changes his views and moral character forever.

One effective device, however, is Berger's use of a significant shift in point of view. For much of the narrative, he restricts the narrative point of view to that of the innocent John; but for one crucial sequence, his readers are given the opportunity to see events from Richie's point of view. This sequence may increase sympathy for Richie, but it also tends to shield the reader from graphic descriptions of the horror of Richie's actions. Richie's callous murder of a stranger at the motel, for instance, is a grisly action; but Richie pays little attention to the resultant gore, and thus the reader is spared a vivid description of the act.

As a result, readers are shielded from the concrete results of Richie's violence, but they are allowed to contemplate Richie's actions as abstract destructive actions.

Themes

The novel unites three recurring themes in Berger's work: the apparently random but utterly devastating impact of violence in modern American life; the general spirit of bad manners and surliness which prevails in much of American social life, and which motivates Richie's murders; and the psychological strength of the innocent Berger hero, after he recognizes the nature of the crisis he is in. The first theme had emerged as early in Berger's work as Killing Time (1967), with Berger's study of the benign insanity of Detweiler, and had also erupted in Vital Parts (1970), the third Reinhart novel, in the episode of the rifleman on the observation deck of the skyscraper.

The second theme has dominated many of Berger's recent novels, including Neighbors (1980), Being Invisible (1987) and The Houseguest (1988), his trilogy of novels about bad manners. Only in Being Invisible (1987), however, had American bad manners merged into violent crime, with the father who tries to kill his daughter's lover and the psychopath who attempts to rape Catherine, before the invisible Wagner frustrates him. Finally, the third theme of the hero's growth in moral strength resulting from his painful initiation into an adult moral awareness has been affirmed consistently throughout Berger's fiction from Crazy in Berlin (1958) to his most recent fictiqn.

Given the familiarity of these themes to the reader of Berger's fiction, Meeting Evil often seems predictable. But the reader who relishes Berger's sense of comic and dramatic irony is likely to continue reading in order to discover how Berger's novel will unfold these themes. Much of the strength of the story results from the fascination the reader is likely to feel for the character of Richie Maranville, who takes the kind of revenge for daily slights and indignities that many have dreamed of.

Key Questions

This novel is likely to provoke discussion of the contemporary American scene with its shocking eruptions of violence and its fascination with serial killers. A major theme to explore is why Richie Maranville has become a psychopathic killer. A secondary issue is how various institutions could have been fooled into thinking that he should be released.

Another theme that can be explored in discussion is the nature of John Felton's naivete. Should John have been willing to help Richie in the first place; if so, should he have separated himself from Richie more quickly? Moreover, are many people as easily fooled as John is?

Finally, the question of John's imagined "heroism" in the middle portions of the novel can be debated, and the credibility of his genuinely courageous actions in the final sequence of the novel can be examined.

1. Is John Felton a credibly drawn young urban professional? Should John have been so trusting of Richie, and should he have been willing to help Richie through some of his difficulties in the beginning? Did John perhaps have an unconscious desire to have a suspenseful adventure on his day off?

2. What aspects of Richie's character make him appear sympathetic or appealing? Are there moments when we might secretly sympathize with Richie's crimes, horrifying as they are?

3. Why does Richie take a liking to John, despite their obvious differences?

What qualities about John might be appealing to a man of Richie's experience?

4. Once Richie takes John on a long ride, and his actions begin to take on an increasingly irrational nature, should John have acted differently? At what points should Richie's actions have revealed to John that he was more than merely an eccentric stranger? Why does the reader conclude more quickly than John that Richie is a very dangerous person?

5. Why does John fail to heed Sharon's warnings about Richie? Is John guilty of stereotyping Sharon on the basis of her appearance and gender, and thus being hostile to her warnings?

6. What is rude and uncivil about the behavior of the other people whom John meets? Do they tend to stereotype John when they assume him to be guilty of several apparently brutal murders?

7. How is John viewed by his wife Joanie? Is Joanie portrayed in a somewhat unflattering manner? Has Berger drawn a stereotypical picture of her?

Or does the final scene, when Richie visits John's home also provide a more sympathetic picture of Joanie?

8. What events bring John to the realization not only that Richie is dangerous to his family, but also that the person who must stop Richie is John himself?

9. Has John been corrupted by the violence he himself becomes involved in during the final sequence of the novel? What lessons or values can John have learned from his ordeal?

10. To what degree is Richie's view of the world confirmed by the actions of the minor characters in the novel, such as the policemen?

Literary Precedents

Aside from Berger's own earlier novels, some of which foreshadow Meeting Evil, the book has obvious precursors in sophisticated popular fiction about violence and, in particular, serial killers. Just as Berger's earlier novel Killing Time was influenced by the sudden prominence of an actual murderer, so Meeting Evil is undoubtedly in part a response to the increasing fascination with serial killers on the part of electronic journalism and print reporters. The novel is also probably obliquely influenced by the popularity of such novels as Thomas Harris's The Silence of the Lambs (1987; please see separate entry) and the films made from them. Berger may also have been responding to the popularity of Elmore Leonard's crime novels.

However, there are strong contrasts between Berger's work and these authors. In contrast to Thomas Harris's Gothic serial killers, Berger's Richie Maranville is not a bizarre and conscienceless monster; and while Leonard's killers may seem a more credible lot, there is a major difference between them and Berger's character. Both Leonard's criminals and Berger's killer seem indifferent to publicity and fame.

But whereas Leonard's pair of killers in such a fine novel like Killshot (1989) are essentially small-time crooks who lack moral idealism and merely look for a good time or an opportunity to make a major score in robbery, Berger's Richie is a twisted idealist, who punishes people for lack of courtesy or discipline. Both Leonard and Berger tend to avoid elaborate neo-Freudian explanations for the destructiveness of their characters, nor do they turn to the currently fashionable obsession with child abuse.

Instead of popular literature, however, Berger's novels tend to be deeply rooted in literary tradition. Behind many of his novels is the American literary tradition of the realistic depiction of violence, especially the work of Hemingway and Faulkner and such writers as Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain. Most of Berger's novels also seem to show the influence of Kafka and other modernist fabulists whose fiction deals with the heightened perceptions and state-of- mind created by a period of crisis.

Related Titles

Killing Time is the study of an unselfish psychopathic murderer. Other Berger novels, including Crazy in Berlin and Who Is Teddy Villanova? (1977), deal with an atmosphere of violence and menace. The transformation of a naive and innocent man into a person ready to use violence is seen in Neighbors and Being Invisible. The same theme recurs in a comic atmosphere in The Feud (1983).

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