

Men in Blue Short Guide

Men in Blue by W. E. B. Griffin

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Characters

Griffin's characters are seldom beset by world-weariness, universal questions of truth or justice, or extended psychological angst. But there are, in this series, perhaps more than in the other two series, "dirty" characters.

Griffin paints Gallagher, who shot Dutch Moffitt, as a piece of flotsam in the human tide; a flat character, he is made even more flat because Griffin does not do with him what he does with other characters — surround them with the description and dialogue. We see him described in terms of dirt, despair, and sordidness, and then he is dead soon after. Peter Wohl, on the other hand, one of the central protagonists, is a classic Griffin character — uniformly interesting, honorable (yet flexible), and (seemingly) irresistible to women. Louise Dutton, who is drawn to Peter Wohl, is a professional person, a newscaster, caught up in crimes she has no control over — and eventually saved, in a typically Griffin-esque fashion, by her millionaire father and his string of TV stations — and taken away from Wohl as well (proving that in Griffin's prose, the hero does not always get the girl). Chief Inspector Denny Coughlin is another Master Gunnery Sergeant Stecker (*Semper Fi*, 1986) — his actions, and the vast background given about him, speak volumes about him — which is good, as he, like Stecker, is remote, regal, and taciturn. And there is a Pick Pickering cognate as well, in Matt Payne, a young (wealthy, of course) man, a senior at Penn, who, upon failing his Marine Corps physical, applies for and enters the Philadelphia Police Department — all in a matter of two days before his Uncle Dutch Moffitt's funeral.

Social Concerns

The novel *Men in Blue* concerns itself with the culture of the Philadelphia Police Department in the 1970s. Among the social issues discussed are rising inner-city drug use, urban blight, and the rather intricate politics existing between and among police, the press, and City Hall. The novel's clear implications are that the police are by and large persons of integrity who do indeed serve and protect despite the efforts of criminals and, on occasion, big-city politicians. Of importance also is what can be termed "the sociology of police life" — that is, the social relationships between cops, and between the cops and the civilians they protect.

Thomas Gaughan also notes that the series is a fictional account of the Philadelphia Police Department during the mayoral tenure of Frank Rizzo, a cop who became police commissioner and later mayor, the same background given the fictional mayor of Philadelphia in this series.



Techniques

As Thomas Gaughan stated in his review of *The Murderers* (the 1995 novel in the *Badge of Honor* series) in *Booklist*: Griffin knows Philly, the Philadelphia PD, and cops, and he fills his novels with vast amounts of detail as proof of that knowledge.

His style sometimes even takes on the convoluted cop-speak found in police reports. He might, for example, take two pages to describe the route a character drives from Chestnut Hill to Center City. Yet, somehow, such excesses become virtues in the eyes of his readers.

The abundant — verging on overwhelming — nature of Griffin's detail may lie at the heart of his popularity.

Yet despicableness is present in this novel, more so than in the other series; the characters are not perfect. Griffin's characters now may have real character flaws, yet they are, on balance, good men. Wohl yells at a cop, and feels remorse; a detective has cheated on his wife, yet he is still a good cop. In addition, there is, perhaps by necessity, more "combat" in this novel and this series than there is in the *Brotherhood of War* or *Corps* series. We see, in *Men In Blue*, the gruesome death of a murderer and a holdup at a diner; later in the series there are assassinations, rape, grim drug use, mob activity, and police corruption. In this latest series, the vivid and comprehensive description remains, but the pall of reality has set in as well.

Themes

The theme of loyalty is very important in the series. The Department is, in many ways, portrayed as a family, one which disciplines, nurtures, and teaches its members. Therefore, as in the Corps series and the Brotherhood of War series, Griffin's effect in *Men in Blue* is to show the workings of this family — as evidenced by the way the police department reacts when Captain Dutch Moffitt is gunned down; at his funeral, over 300 police cars form part of the procession. Another dominant theme in the novel is that of honor and integrity — again, this is a theme which is dominant in the other series as well. So-called "dirty" cops are seldom seen in Griffin's police novels. Instead, the reader is presented with characters from a variety of backgrounds who respond with distinct professionalism and pride in their jobs. The overall thematic impulse of the novels is toward admiration for police and understanding for their work. In addition, the thin line between propriety and impropriety is explored in this novel and the others in the series. For example, Staff Inspector Wohl acquiesces, in the interests of protecting Moffitt's memory, to the disposal of evidence of Moffitt's possession of unauthorized ammunition in his revolver.

Key Questions

Any discussion of the role of the police in society must eventually address the character of those persons who are police officers, and the extent to which they create and interpret the laws they uphold, rather than simply following them. Although the characters in the novel are largely moral, the novel nonetheless blurs, more than in previous Griffin novels, the line between right and wrong. Discussion of these issues in terms of the characters in the novel and their actions will eventually lead to an examination of the larger social issues involved in the novel.

1. Why do Charley McFadden and Jesus Martinez spend their own time looking for Captain Moffitt's killer?

What does this say about them as persons? As police officers?

2. What do you think of Peter Wohl's not saying anything when Natali disposes of the illegal ammunition from Moffitt's gun?

3. What are Matt Payne's motivations for joining the police force? Why does Chief Inspector Coughlin not try to immediately talk him out of it? How is Matt Payne like and unlike Pick Pickering in *Semper Fi*?

4. Why does Mother Moffitt behave the way she does toward her former daughter-in-law? What does this say about her cultural upbringing and expectations?

5. Why do some people act surprised when they learn that Peter Wohl is very young for his rank? What does this reaction tell you about their expectations of senior officers? What does his rank say about him — and perhaps his family background?

6. How are the general sensibilities and attitudes shown in the novel, which takes place in 1973, different from mid-1990s values, sensibilities, and attitudes? How is 1973 Philadelphia different from a 1996 large city?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

Men in Blue has a rich heritage of police writing and detective novels. It retains elements of the classic police procedural novel. Indeed, as implied above, perhaps the procedure in the novel and series is the single most important structural element. In particular, Michael Malone's *Time's Witness*, although set in a small North Carolina city, also offers Griffin's type of detail and the attention to the interactions between the different elements of the city. Ultimately, though, Griffin's police novels are most like Griffin's military novels than any other related novels of the police or detective genre; the similarities between character types, the treatment of detail and dialogue, and the strong eventual moral focus — that the police, like the Army and Corps, are good and filled with upright, decent people, for the most part — is too evident to overlook.



Related Titles

In later novels in the Badge of Honor series, Matt Payne becomes a detective and Peter Wohl's assistant, partly to keep him out of danger (his father as well as his uncle, Captain Moffitt, were killed in the line of duty) — although he still gets shot once and catches, by luck, a major criminal. Peter Wohl remains the most central character in the series, having a brief relationship with Matt's sister in the process. Matt Payne, Peter Wohl, Jesus Martinez and Charley McFadden, and one or two other officers progress through character development and promotion through the existing novels in the series. Other characters, such as Matt's parents and Mother Moffitt, remain largely as they are painted in the first novel. Griffin repeats much of the background information in the subsequent novels, so that a reader new to the series may start with any of the books without feeling at sea.

The first two books in the Badge of Honor series were originally published under the name John Kevin Dugan. To date, this continuing series includes: *Special Operations* (1989); *Men in Blue* (1991); *The Victim* (1991); *The Witness* (1992); *The Assassin* (1992); *The Murderers* (1995).



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994