

# Middle of Nowhere Short Guide

## Middle of Nowhere by Ridley Pearson

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# Characters

Pearson relies on stereotypes and stock characters; these characters are carried on the current of the plot. Despite the presence of Daphne Williams, cop psychologist, the novel is not grounded in any kind of character psychology. The characters are moved to where they need to be in order to drive the plot to its climax.

Lou Boldt is a policeman in the finest cop tradition; even his name carries associations of strength and uprightness. Boldt stands up for his beliefs when everyone is against him and just tries to get the job done. He is also a family man, concerned about the safety of his wife and children as the Blue Flu invades his home. After angry cops throw a brick through his window, Boldt sends his wife Liz and his children to stay with friends; tension between them grows as he is more consumed with the case. Liz says, "You know I'll be supportive. . . . But, Lou, please, try to see that it stays outside the family. I'm afraid for you, for us." When he is shot at outside his home, Boldt refuses to tell his wife because he has vowed not to let the work come home. Liz, a cancer survivor, serves as a contrast to her rationalist, empiricist husband. As Boldt puzzles over the details of the case and struggles to take action, Liz counsels him to have faith and patience: "Her 'healing,' her 'new faith,' seemed to carry her through these situations." She is spirituality and emotion where he is reason and action.

Boldt notes that the marriage carries on even though it has been battered by Liz's fight with cancer and Boldt's demanding work schedule: "They practiced mutual tolerance, mutual support; they limped through the challenges thrown up by daily life, sometimes overcoming, sometimes only surviving." However, Boldt's job invades the home in another way, in the form of Daphne Williams. Even though their affair was brief and occurred some time ago, the sexual tension between them is strong. Daphne is different from Liz in many ways; it is these ways that make her most attractive to Boldt.

She is strong, smart, and sexy. They share a bond through their work, yet even as they function as a forensic dream team, they struggle against the sexual tension that constantly runs under the surface of the encounters. This tension finally bubbles over in Colorado when Boldt and Daphne are investigating the Flek case; they share a passionate kiss, which Boldt later confesses to Liz. This places further strain on their relationship as Boldt's job continuously invades the home on several fronts.

Sexual temptation is the only weakness Boldt confesses to his wife. While he must be strong with Liz, Boldt is permitted some vulnerability with Daphne. She nurses him after his attack by the cops involved in the CAProp scam. When Boldt is shot at, he turns to Daphne for help. Likewise, he assumes responsibility for rescuing Daphne when Bryce Abbott Flek kidnaps her. Even though Pearson depicts Daphne as strong and intelligent, by the end of the novel she assumes her proper place as damsel in distress. Flek beats her, locks her in the trunk of his car, threatens to rape her, shoots her in the leg, and finally leaves her for dead. It is Boldt who saves Daphne. A pair to the end, they limp off the last page of the novel.



Significantly, it is not Boldt and his wife limping at the end of *Middle of Nowhere*, but Boldt and Daphne, "a pair of gimps," another job done.

Boldt's relationship with Daphne is a key fact of his job. The department forbids the mixing of personal and professional, yet Boldt constantly walks that fine line.

The crooked cops use his relationship in an attempt to blackmail him off the case. Yet Boldt remains loyal; his relationship with Daphne is in many ways a marriage. One of the more interesting aspects of Pearson's characterization is the way he personalizes the professional relationships in the novel.

Pearson's website notes a letter from a woman fan thanking him for writing such wonderful novels, novels that create suspense but at the same time are sexually exciting. It is possible that he makes the novel more attractive to a wider audience: readers who seek the thrill of a suspense novel as well as readers looking for the sparks of male/female relationships.



## Social Concerns

Ridley Pearson's novel *Middle of Nowhere* reflects twin concerns in American society today: our growing preoccupation with the negative consequences of rising affluence and technological progress and the desire for law and order. The plot follows the attempts of Lou Boldt, homicide detective, and his colleagues to solve the mysteries of an assault on a policewoman and a rash of burglaries while much of the police force is on a sick-out—the "Blue Flu." The novel takes place in Seattle, home of Microsoft and Starbucks, two emblems of late-twentieth-century capitalism. The city itself symbolizes the New Economy, powered by the Internet and increasingly globalized. The novel reflects the ambivalence felt throughout society at these changes, particularly the havoc wreaked on communities and the rights and privacy of individuals. The narrator describes the home—a houseboat—of Daphne Matthews, cop psychologist and onetime lover of Lou Boldt: Community still meant something here.

The hippie feel of the past twenty years was giving way to Microsoft geeks who looked stupid smoking their cigars while sucking down microbrewery beer on warm summer nights, with the city's killer skyline forming a stage set in the near distance. An animosity existed surrounding the influx of the chip set, despite the lift it had given the economy.

The police walking the beat, doing their job to protect the community, form a stalwart front line against crime and chaos.

This group is set subtextually against the purveyors of the New Economy.

The ambivalence of society towards progress and economic change is further exemplified by the parallel plots of the novel. In one thread, the police department is undergoing a sick-out as officers campaign for raises and more freedom to make money while off duty. It is revealed that officers in the Crimes Against Property unit are involved in a gun-trafficking scheme in order to make money to tide them over during the sick-out. Here Pearson presents officers whose duty to protect the community is corrupted by the need for money. Furthermore, the instruments of their corruption are the tools of their trade: guns collected as evidence. The crime fighters have become criminals as a result of their greed, thus betraying the community. Simultaneously, however, one cannot help but ask why a city as affluent as Seattle refuses to pay the officers what they need. The cops are used by the city and consequently try to manipulate the system.

Another instance of exploitation and manipulation forms the second thread of the novel, providing a more explicit critique of economic change at the expense of the individual. The men responsible for the burglaries are two brothers, Bryce Abbott Flek and David Ansel Flek. David, the younger brother, is in the Jefferson County Corrections Facility in Colorado. The jail is a forprofit institution run by Etheredge Corporation; this is actually part of a growing nationwide trend (documented in 2000 in the magazine *Mother Jones*, for example) of turning the prison system into a private industry composed of a web of subcontractors, thus raising profits and revenue for companies and states and



significantly reducing accountability. An important component of this shift in the corrections industry, noted in the novel, is the use of prison labor.

Prisoners are exploited for profit in the name of "rehabilitation"; in *Middle of Nowhere*, prisoners are used as telemarketers for an insurance company. Prisoners ask potential customers a series of questions: "Estimated income," Daphne says. "Value of residence.

Personal property in the residence. Number of computers owned by the family.

Number of CD players; number of VCRs.

All these little demographic triggers that satiate an insurance company's appetite for data, but in the wrong hands. . . ." David passes this information along to his brother Bryce. Bryce then knows which homes to hit. He copies the frequencies used in garage door openers, as he clones the frequencies for cellular phones, in order to enter the homes and steal.

This thread of the plot is significant in that it reflects concerns over the way crime in this country is handled. Even as rates for violent crime decline, we as a society are concerned over law and order, as well as the skyrocketing prison population. We must confront the reality that the United States has one of the largest prison populations in the world and that many of our programs for rehabilitation have failed. At the same time, we fear crime in our own backyards. The two threads of the plot come together as crimes against property. The police commit crimes against property even as they work in Crimes Against Property.

The Flek brothers have based their criminal careers on crimes against property. Pearson presents these crimes as invasions, invasions of the sanctity of home and what hardworking people have earned. The stealing of "stuff" is a true violation. That the "stuff" is mostly high-end electronics, and that the method of breaking and entering is predicated on tampering with technology, reflects a fear in contemporary society of the potential dangers of technology. We fear the invasion of our privacy by the Internet and cellular phones the way we fear the invasion of our homes by a criminal.



## Techniques

Middle of Nowhere may be characterized by its excessively convoluted plot leading right back to where it started. The "middle of nowhere" of the title signifies where one of the climaxes of the novel takes place, among some high-tension towers outside of Seattle; it also signifies the way Boldt is caught between the personal and the professional in a no-man's-land of conflicting loyalties. However, it might also refer to the structure of the book. The novel begins with the assault on Officer Maria Sanchez (who was investigating crooked cops) and ends with the apprehension of the crooked cops who assaulted her to keep her from discovering the truth about their gun scheme; in between there are several plot twists leading the reader into the "middle of nowhere" as we struggle to figure out what the several threads have to do with one another. Pearson's novel is constructed as one red herring on top of another. The cops spend much of the novel trying to track down Bryce Abbott Flek, knowing for at least part of that time that he had nothing to do with the assault on Sanchez. The real issue of the novel—the corrupt cops in the Crimes Against Property unit—is resolved in the last ten pages of the book. Ultimately the threads do not come together as tightly as Pearson may have intended; the author himself seems to have trouble keeping those threads together.

Pearson uses multiple points of view to tell the story. This is one reason that the novel seems so multilayered; it is almost cacophonous. As the many voices of the characters chime in to tell the story, their roles are not made completely clear. They speak their piece, further the plot, and then disappear. The only constants are Boldt and Daphne, and their qualities are so familiar to readers as stock characters that they really do not need to contribute their point of view at all.



# Themes

The themes of loyalty and duty run as counterpoints to the exploitation and manipulation of cops and criminals in *Middle of Nowhere*. The corrupt cops trade in the duty and responsibility signified by their shields for easy money and the betrayal of their fellow officers and their community.

The people of Seattle live in fear as a result of the Blue Flu: "The Blue Flu was lending the criminal element courage. While the cat's away, the mice do play. . . . The city ran wild with crime while his [Boldt's] coworkers willingly stayed home awaiting policy change." The needs of the community are superseded by the needs of one particular group. Pearson shows this by giving the cases of two of the Flu's victims, Cathy Kawamoto and Anthony Brumewell. Both are caught by Flek's scheme and robbed and assaulted. Cathy is a Japanese girl who lives with her sister and does translations of romance novels; Anthony lives alone and works nights. By providing details of these characters, Pearson makes real the effects of the Blue Flu on the community and how one group cannot act without the action affecting all.

Boldt sees it as his responsibility to fulfill the needs of the many rather than acquiesce to the demands of the few. It seems that the individual is less important than groups in power and their interests, and it seems that technological and economic progress has outpaced basic rights to life, liberty, and property. However, Boldt's loyalty is to his job and the ideals that job is meant to represent. He says to the head of the police officers' guild, "You know what I think, Krishevski? I think you enjoy all the attention, the cameras, the headlines. Seeing your name in print. But the sad truth is you're misusing the trust of your fellow officers— this entire city—for your own personal gain." Boldt stays on the job even when his entire department is out with the Blue Flu, and faces heavy criticism and threats for it.

A brick painted blue is hurled through his window, injuring his wife. After another officer is revealed to be against him, Boldt thinks: "Another ally down, and this one still wearing the badge, still working in the office. A friend. How many others on the job felt similarly? he wondered. How much internal sabotage was taking place in support of the Flu?" Boldt has a strong sense of loyalty to his community and to the colleagues who stick with him, Daphne and John LaMoia, his protege. Yet his loyalty is first and foremost to the job; as his wife says, "You're a cop. Once and forever." The beating he receives from cops involved in the CAProp scam, cops trying to silence him, is more than a physical beating. It is also a psychic beating as he realizes that in the upside-down world of the sick-out, a cop with a sense of duty is a cop with misplaced loyalties. Boldt cannot bear that the violence is cop on cop, that the crimes are being perpetrated by cops. However, his sense of duty prevails. He gets the job done, playing by the rules. He refuses to tamper with evidence, to frame anyone. He wants the truth even as he realizes how destructive it will be.

The Flek brothers' loyalty to one another provides a foil to Boldt's loyalty to his ideal of duty. The police department and the guild act as sites for conflicting loyalties.





Each is a closed universe, a hermetically sealed space with its own set of rules and codes. Thus the Internal Investigation being carried out by Sanchez is especially dangerous; problems within these closed systems can only be dangerous, yet the presence of a suspicious outsider—first Sanchez, then Boldt—is an even greater threat. An officer is either with the guild or the department. Being between the two is being in the "middle of nowhere," a most dangerous place to be. Likewise, the Flek brothers' relationship is a closed universe that does not allow for any outsiders. Bryce and David engage in a symbiotic relationship; his loyalty to his brother ultimately results in David's death. The intrusion of Boldt and Daphne into the closed world of the Flek brothers proves fatal for both men.

Daphne, trying to reason with Bryce as he threatens her life, reveals his feelings of guilt over his brother's sacrifice. Bryce says, "You don't know nothing about Davie. What he did for me." Daphne realizes: "He didn't complete the thought, but Daphne's mind raced ahead looking for answers. 'What he did for me. . . .' Suddenly she saw it, she understood what he was talking about.

Psychologically, it changed everything.

Davie was a martyr." David's death in prison at the hands of other inmates—again, within another closed system—is punishment for his role in revealing the prison's telemarketing scheme. He died protecting his brother; the inmates expect him to be loyal to the world of the prison, not to his brother, and he pays for this misplaced loyalty with his life.

Middle of Nowhere explores the theme of loyalty: whom we should be loyal to, when loyalty should end, when it goes too far. Of all the loyalties portrayed in the novel, only the loyalty of Boldt is sanctioned. He is faithful to something greater and larger than a closed system guided by its own interests and suspicions. While the department and the guild and the Flek brothers are driven by fear and greed, bent on protecting themselves against outsiders, Boldt's loyalty is to the community and the ideal of protection and service he has sworn to uphold.

# Adaptations

For several years, there has been interest in adapting Pearson's work for film. The cable channel Home Box Office was originally interested in producing several films featuring Lou Boldt but reconsidered. Currently, the Arts & Entertainment network is planning a movie based on the Lou Boldt novels; filming is expected to start in 2001.



## Key Questions

The conflict between loyalty and duty to the individual and to the community is crucial to Pearson's novel *Middle of Nowhere*.

Boldt struggles throughout the book to situate his loyalties; he often describes himself as being "in the middle of nowhere," both personally and professionally. The personal and professional problems of the character are linked closely to the social themes of the novel, showing that private concerns and public concerns must often go together.

1. Boldt and Flek are each criticized in the novel for having misplaced loyalties.

Where do these loyalties come from?

To whom do these characters have their loyalties? Are they legitimate, or are they misplaced?

2. The crux of the novel's plot is the "Blue Flu," or the police department sick-out in a fight for higher wages. The safety of the community is placed in jeopardy because of the police department's demands. What seems to be the novel's attitude towards authority? Which does it advocate as being more important, the needs of a small group, or the needs of the community?

3. Boldt's life, and the lives of those he cares about, are placed in danger as a result of his sense of duty. Is Boldt an idealist? To what extent is his idealism unrealistic? Are his principles upheld at the end of the book?

4. Women cops appear throughout the book. Analyze the portrayal of these characters. How are they depicted? Are they viewed as powerful, or as victims? How are they viewed in relation to the male characters?

## Literary Precedents

Pearson finds many of his ideas in news stories and contemporary issues: immigration controversies, scientific or technological developments, social problems. He cites among his influences John D. MacDonald, another author whose books reflect social concerns of the time. Pearson has also mentioned a debt to writers of noir fiction; however, Pearson's work seems somewhat removed from that line. Boldt, while torn between his sense of duty, his attraction to Daphne, and his family obligations, chooses the high ground every time, doing his job and staying (mostly) faithful to his longsuffering wife. He refuses to engage in shady dealings; the line between himself and the criminal is clearly defined. One would never argue that Flek is the dark side of Boldt; rather, Pearson uses both men to show different sides of loyalty.

Pearson's work has much more in common with writers like Tom Clancy and Michael Crichton. Like Pearson, these authors write meticulously and thoroughly researched suspense novels drawn from contemporary issues and problems.

## Related Titles

Lou Boldt has been featured in six other novels by Pearson. The first, *Undercurrents* (1988), introduces Boldt and Daphne Matthews as cops and as lovers as they try to solve a series of grisly murders. In *The Angel Maker* (1993), Boldt is no longer working as a cop, but Daphne enlists him to help her discover who is kidnapping and killing teenage runaways for their organs and selling them on the black market. *No Witnesses* (1994) teams Boldt and Daphne again as they solve a case in which people across the country are being poisoned by food sold in supermarket chains. *Beyond Recognition* (1997) is a mystery involving an arsonist who targets single mothers but spares their children. *The Pied Piper* (1998) again focuses on children, this time in a case of kidnapping and black market adoptions. In *The First Victim*, Boldt is confronted with illegal aliens being smuggled into Seattle. Like *Middle of Nowhere*, Pearson's previous novels featuring Lou Boldt draw their plots from newspaper headlines and current issues facing society.

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