

Murder Against the Grain Short Guide

Murder Against the Grain by Emma Lathen

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Characters

In addition to the Sloan Guaranty Inemployees who regularly appear in the series, this novel includes a character developed for satiric effect. Abe Baranoff, aesthete and artistic entrepreneur, has arranged cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union, and in an early chapter of the book he is seen greeting the arrival from the USSR of a troupe of trained otters. Baranoff is rendered ridiculous in other scenes in a broadly drawn caricature of the renowned producer Sol Hurok.

Social Concerns

In this award-winning novel, Lathen resorts to a topical issue in choosing as her crime the theft of a \$985,000 check the Russians tender to pay for American wheat. The action is motivated by the thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations during the Khrushchev regime. Although this novel was written in 1967, it has ironically remained topical given the embargoes of the 1970s and the continual U.S.-Soviet tensions of the 1980s. International relations inevitably become involved in the solution to the crime.

Suspects include both Soviets and Americans. Thus the investigation must proceed with diplomatic tact.

Various bureaucracies are held up for ridicule in this work. The opening chapter contains excerpts from several newspapers from around the globe demonstrating the slant each puts on the thaw in the U.S.-Soviet affairs. In the course of the investigation, the F.B.I., the State Department, the KGB, and other government agencies intervene in bureaucratic ways to complicate the discovery of the criminal.

An important secondary theme is the difficulties that face women in the work place. Four working women play important roles either as suspects or as assistants in solving the crime. Rose Corsa's private life is played off against that of another secretary, Tessie Marcus, herself both a witness and a suspect. One of the victims worked for the widow Rita Halloran who runs a limousine rental agency and who must deal with the scandal her employee's death causes for the firm. And a young secretary in the Soviet Consulate finds her job made more difficult because of her romantic involvement with an American businessman. These minor characters are developed in terms of the problems they face at work, many of which arise because of their complicity in the crime.

Techniques

In *Murder Against the Grain* Thatcher works closely with New York City Detective Inspector Phillip Lyons. This collaboration between the amateur detective and the official police is another staple of Golden Age detective fiction.

Themes

This novel provides an interesting variation on the theme of greed, which is ubiquitous in the series. Given that several of the suspects are Wall Street bankers or brokers quite wealthy in their own right, Thatcher is puzzled as to why they would jeopardize their vested interests for such a relatively small sum of money. One of the explanations advanced is the "New Life" theory. Even a wealthy man might steal such a sum of money simply to be able to disappear and begin life anew in a country from which he could not be extradited.

Key Questions

There are several topics that would be fruitful for discussion with any Lathen novel. All of Lathen's novels, for example, introduce a topical theme related to the financial world: graft, greed, international trade, and the stock and futures markets. Students may thus find it interesting to compare Lathen's reading of the situations with that of the media and other sources, or to contrast an actual occurrence with a similar one in a novel.

As is often noted, while Lathen mocks the pretensions of the financial world, her works ultimately hold capitalism up as a positive force; there may be those who abuse the system, but the system itself is good. Thus, a discussion of what capitalism represents in the novels — its order, basic nature, function — could also be fruitful, especially when looking at novels such as *Murder Against the Grain* and *East Is East* (1991) where American capitalism is contrasted with other economic systems.

Contemporary social issues also appear in each novel: the status of the family, tradition, youth and age, and women, to name a few. A comparison of the corporate family with the private may be of interest — the differences in the novels between wives and secretaries, for example. Lathen also shows Wall Street as one of the last all-male bastions, and her female characters often make the men uneasy. The strong female is still a *rara avis* here, and most female characters are still secretaries and wives of the old fashioned sort.

1. Discuss the view of the news media and their effects upon events in the world of business and government.

Murder Against the Grain (and other Lathen novels) contains several pseudo-articles from major newspapers and they are clearly parodies. Is Lathen implying that the media is in general not well informed and therefore silly or, perhaps, dangerous?

2. Since *Murder Against the Grain* was published in 1967, U.S.-Russian trading has continued. Has the view of that trading partnership changed much?

3. Is Lathen stereotyping the Soviets in the novel? Look, for example, at the various reactions by the Soviet staff in New York to the arrival of Maseryan, or the meeting in the captain's quarters aboard the grain ship.

4. Examine Lathen's views of diplomacy and diplomats, here as well as in novels such as *When in Greece* (1969), *Sweet and Low* (1974), and *East is East* (1991). Contrast their handling of affairs with that of the denizens of Wall Street.



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