

The Murderer Is a Fox Short Guide

The Murderer Is a Fox by Ellery Queen

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Characters

The central character in *The Murderer Is a Fox* is Ellery Queen. Although he remains relentlessly analytical, he is less emotionally detached here than in many previous works. His involvement in the affairs of the Fox family affect him as a human being, and his attempt to solve the mystery is prompted, not so much by his fascination with puzzle decipherment, as by his desire to help Davy and Linda Fox discover happiness. Ellery, having abandoned his pince-nez and walking stick, has ceased to be the pure logician and the snobbish prig. Significantly, along with Ellery's growth into a rounded character comes the creation of three-dimensional supporting figures in his adventures. The portraits of the death-obsessed Davy Fox, the caring wife Linda, and the falsely convicted Bayard, while not flawless, reveal an important development in Queen's abilities in the field of characterization.

Rather than serving as mere plot facilitators, they exist as individuals caught up in real human dilemmas. Other noteworthy characters in the novel include Alvin Cain, the malicious young man determined to destroy Davy and Linda's marriage, and Emmy DuPre, the town gossip. Together the cast of characters in *The Murderer Is a Fox* present a reasonably satisfying picture of the complexity underlying all human communities.



Social Concerns/Themes

The Murderer Is a Fox belongs to the middle period of Queen's detective fiction. Beginning with *Halfway House* (1936), Queen abandoned his use of a nationality in the title of his works and began to lessen his emphasis on the puzzle element in his novels, but it was not until 1942 and the publication of *Calamity Town* that a clear change in Queen's work was apparent. *Calamity Town* is subtitled a "novel," not "a problem in deduction" as had been the earlier works, and this fact alone signals Queen's movement away from the restrictions of the pure puzzle format.

Calamity Town is also the first Queen novel set in Wrightsville, a small new England town which serves as a microcosm of middle American society.

While *Calamity Town* does contain a puzzle to be solved, this element is played down sufficiently to allow for commentary on other issues such as marital discord and the insularity of the small town.

The Murderer Is a Fox is the second Queen work set in Wrightsville and as such bears a certain resemblance to *Calamity Town* in its exploration of the surfaces and depths of American small town existence. The time is the summer of 1944, and the action begins with Captain Davy Fox's return to his hometown after his participation in World War II. Davy, the reader soon learns, is a tormented man, emotionally troubled by his experience of death and dying.

Not only has he witnessed the deaths of fellow servicemen during his service as a fighter pilot in the China-Burma-India theater, but twelve years earlier his mother, Jessica Fox, had died of an overdose of digitalis administered, according to the verdict in her murder trial, by her husband and Davy's father, Bayard Fox. The result of these experiences, coupled with the suspicion of his wife Linda's infidelity, a suspicion fostered by the receipt of letters while overseas from an unknown sender hinting at her unfaithfulness, is the creation within Davy of a compulsion to kill his wife. Linda, informed by Davy of his fear that he will kill her, decides to enlist the aid of Ellery Queen, the man who had been instrumental in solving the Wright murder case several years earlier, the case recounted in *Calamity Town* (1942).

After assessing the situation, Queen determines that the only way to help Davy is to reopen his mother's murder case in the hope of proving that Davy's father was not responsible for her death, and by extension that Davy is not the son of a murderer. If this could be proven, then Davy would no longer believe that his inheritance from his father was "tainted blood" and the "killer instinct." While much of the novel is devoted to Queen's investigation of the twelve-year-old murder, the work departs from a strict adherence to the "whodunit" pattern to examine material other than clues and evidence.

This material includes the psychological impact of the war experience upon individuals, the underside of the superficially harmonious small town, and the theme of the sins of the father being visited upon the child. Although Queen does not delve into these issues

in great depth, their presence makes *The Murderer Is a Fox* a more socially relevant work than his earlier "problems in deduction." As a consequence, the reader is more involved with the outcome of the investigation, for the characters and their situations have been presented in more than a stereotypic and one-dimensional fashion.

As in all Queen's work, and most detective fiction, the dominant theme concerns the restoration of wholeness and order to a community or family torn apart by the intrusion of violence and antisocial action into their world.

What makes *The Murderer Is a Fox* more interesting in this regard than many of Queen's earlier pieces is that the detective-hero is permitted to accomplish only so much in his role as problemsolver. While Ellery does succeed in removing the stigma of being a murderer's son from Davy Fox, he can do little but reflect upon the operation of the forces of good and evil in the world at large. At the conclusion of the novel, the members of the Fox family are happily reunited, but to the unknown future are left such questions as how Wrightsville will receive the nowinnocent Bayard and how Davy and Linda will deal with the legacy of Davy's war experiences.



Techniques

At the heart of *The Murderer Is a Fox* lies a puzzle to be solved, and as in all Queen's work the solution to the puzzle necessitates the development of a complex plot. The plot in this novel involves Queen in a detailed reconstruction of the events of the day, twelve years earlier, that Jessica Fox died. Still true to the tradition of empirical thought, Ellery conscientiously considers all the evidence, both the remaining physical evidence and the testimony of those present at the time of Jessica's death in order to arrive at the solution to the case. Given that the crime under investigation occurred twelve years earlier, the novel, to be successful, requires that the past be convincingly recreated. Such a recreation demands a fair measure of skill, for should the characters remember the past too clearly and precisely, the reader will feel that the novel lacks credibility. Queen avoids this danger by giving all the individuals involved with Jessica's death incomplete and sometimes contradictory memories.

Although the analysis of clues and evidence plays an important role in the case's solution, in this novel intuition is given a certain measure of authority.

This moves *The Murderer Is a Fox* away from the pure puzzle format, for Ellery's resolution of the case requires the exercise of both reason and emotion. Also interesting in this regard is the fact that the final solution, presented after an earlier false solution is established, remains unverifiable.

Adaptations

Please refer to this section in the biographical entry on Ellery Queen.

Literary Precedents

Queen's departure from the pure puzzle format in *Calamity Town* and *The Murderer Is a Fox* suggests the influence of writers outside the field of the formal detective novel. Also suggestive of other influences is Queen's depiction of the small town of Wrightsville. Given that Queen in his magazine, had been publishing the work of writers such as Hammett, it is possible that their treatment of American life had an impact upon his writing. While Queen can never be considered a member of the hard-boiled tradition of detective fiction, his post-1940s work, including *The Murderer Is a Fox* reveals an attempt to broaden his social vision beyond the confines of the enclosed world of the upper class.

The town of Wrightsville, named perhaps in tribute to S. S. Van Dine, the pseudonym of Willard Huntington Wright, serves as an example of typical middle American life. Superficially placid and orderly, beneath its surface it reveals the same measure of unhappiness and discord as any other human community. A number of commentators have suggested that Queen's movement away from the restricted scene of a small group of people in an isolated locale into the larger world reveals the influence of the naturalistic school of American fiction as practiced by Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. None of Queen's novels can be considered entirely naturalistic, but in their examination of the social forces at work upon man, and in their view of human action as explicable in cause and effect terms they display elements of this school of fiction.

Less artificial works that are more representative of the human condition suggest that Queen was attempting to present, within the framework of the detective novel, a more serious approach to the world at large than he had before.



Related Titles

Other Queen works set in the town of Wrightsville and exploring the same milieu include *Calamity Town* (1942), *Ten Days' Wonder* (1948), *Double, Double* (1950), *The Last Woman in His Life* (1970), and the short stories "The Robber of Wrightsville," "The Gamblers' Club," "Death of Don Juan," "The Wrightsville Heirs," "Mum is the Word," and "Eve of the Wedding."

Although the individuals in *The Last Woman in His Life* are essentially stereotypes, they are interesting as representative of certain human behavior. The primary force driving most of the characters to action is greed. The three exwives, Audrey the actress, Marcia the show-girl, Alice the nurse, along with Sanford Effing the lawyer, Foxy Faulks the gambler, and the many women trying to establish themselves as Laura, Johnny's "true love," are motivated only by their desire for wealth. As a result they are accorded little respect or admiration. Interestingly, the novel's villain, Al Marsh, is presented much more sympathetically, for his crime was not the result of a desire for money or power but is perceived as a crime of passion. Having revealed himself to Johnny as a homosexual and having confessed his love for him, he is subjected to Johnny's horror and disgust. Fearing exposure of his homosexuality and distraught at Johnny's rejection, he murders him. As in many of Queen's early works, the victim in this novel is presented as, to some extent, worthy of his fate. Johnny, incapable of lasting relationships with women, careless in the use of his money and power, and lacking compassion for his friend's situation, violates the social code on many levels. For this reason his murder is not entirely unfitting. At the end of the novel the good, in this case Leslie Carpenter, are rewarded, and the social virtues of honesty, compassion, and hard work are upheld.

Queen's post-1950 works are interesting in their attempts to treat contemporary social issues. And on *The Eighth Day* (1964) is considered by some to be a protest novel, examining the failures of twentieth-century society by means of a contrast with the religious-socialist community which serves as the novel's setting. In *The Last Woman in His Life*, Queen deals with the topic of homosexuality, albeit in a dated fashion. The plot centers upon the investigation of the murder of John Levering Benedict III, a Harvard classmate of Ellery's.

After meeting Ellery and his father at the airport, Johnny offers them the use of a cabin on his country estate near Wrightsville for some rest and relaxation. The Queens' escape from the cares of the world in Wrightsville, still a "viable Shangri-La" for Ellery, is soon interrupted by the arrival of Johnny, his attorney and best friend Al Marsh, and Johnny's three ex-wives for a financial discussion because Johnny intends to change his will. That evening Johnny is murdered, but not before he has provided Queen with a holographic will, and a "dying message." Discovered near his body are three pieces of clothing, one each from the closets of the three ex-wives. As the case unfolds much suspicion is cast on these three women and their associates before the true culprit is revealed.



While the solving of the puzzle is central to *The Last Woman in His Life*, Queen focuses much of his attention in this novel on the themes of love, money, and power. Benedict had intended to leave his fortune to his soon-to-be fourth wife Laura, his "true love," but if he were not married at the time of his death it was to go to his only living relative, Leslie Carpenter.

Leslie, unlike the majority of the other characters, is neither greedy nor power hungry. Her commitment in life is to helping the poor. Leslie and Ellery provide the novel with its moral focus, arguing in the way they live their lives that love cannot be bought, that money must be used wisely and for the social good, and that the exercise of power requires discretion and compassion.

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