The New Centurions Short Guide

The New Centurions by Joseph Wambaugh

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Characters

In The New Centurions, Wambaugh takes his heroes from different walks of life. Serge is a Chicano who wants to forget his ancestry but cannot. Gus is a small gentle man who hates himself because he thinks he is a coward. Roy considers himself an intellectual, but finds that the people he despises, other policemen, members of minority groups, even his wife, are at least as smart as he is Also memorable are the older cops, his heroes' mentors, especially Kilvinsky, a genuine philosopher who understands the world but because of the demands of his job cannot cope with other emotional demands. He loses his wife, after losing his child, and ends up alone. All the young policemen learn and grow. Serge outgrows sexual promiscuity, finds a wife and learns to accept his heritage. Gus learns to accept himself. Roy unexpectedly finds his true love. Each of them typifies the fate of the policeman, yet each is an individual.

The female characters tend to be less highly developed. Mariana, with whom Serge falls in love, is exactly what he needs. Vicki, who is married to Gus, is fat and helpless, one more heavy burden for him to carry and resent. Roy's wife sees through him and leaves him, but he falls in love with Laura Hunt, who is black — even though he has begun to hate blacks. If these men find solace at home, they may survive the trauma of their profession.

Wambaugh also peoples this novel with rebellious college students, juvenile gang members, winos and prostitutes who are seen as symptoms of society's disintegration.

Social Concerns

When Wambaugh was in graduate school during the late 1960s, he could not discuss his police work with his fellow students because they considered policemen "pigs." This book is an attempt to explain the difficulty of police work and to demonstrate the day to day heroism of the police officer to the ordinary citizen.

The New Centurions follows three men, whose backgrounds vary, as they learn how to be police officers. The novel begins as they train at the police academy and experience the insecurities and fears of their first five years of service. During this time, they marry, divorce, become fathers. They mature, discovering strengths they did not know they had and they take on the values of policemen. These young men must cope with horrific social conditions, not only in ghetto neighborhoods, with their muggers, prostitutes, pimps and juvenile gangs but in "good" neighborhoods too, where neurotics, drug addicts, sexual perverts and child abusers create chaos. Wambaugh sees a society sliding into a pathologically selfish hedonism where the police must compromise their own honor and endanger their own lives to trap criminals whom the courts will not punish, or others, homosexuals, for example, whom the courts should not punish. At that point in time the police also had to cope with the Black Power movement and the hostility of the Black Moslems. Worse than this, according to Wambaugh, is the white, liberal guilt and condescension which refuses to consider blacks as responsible for their own actions and therefore denies them manhood. This must result in social breakdown and Wambaugh ends his novel with the Watts riots, demonstrating how fragile the social order really is and how crucial it is to maintain law and order.

Techniques

This is a procedural novel; that is, a novel in which police work as it is actually carried out provides the basis for the action. The novel's plot moves quickly and excitingly. The policemen train together, do their job in various Los Angeles neighborhoods and are reunited during the Watts riots. Crimes are committed; the police officers face danger. But when they are off-duty, these young men fall in love. Life is unpredictable and shocking, often brutal, yet the novels seems plausible and authentic, securely based on Wambaugh's own police work. The dialogue is funny and again seems totally genuine. Wambaugh has an ear for police lingo and also for the speech of the ghetto. Both are sometimes scatological, but tremendously expressive and often hilarious. Wambaugh's descriptions are graphic, too graphic for some readers. He shows the reader the bruised babies and the cop's guts on the sidewalk; the reader smells the public toilets and the winos.

Themes

Wambaugh's major theme has to do with the difficulties involved in being a police officer in what he has called "The Big Sewer," the modern city.

Society recognizes the physical dangers policemen face, but does not recognize the emotional dangers which are far greater. The urban police officer is under constant emotional strain, knowing he can be killed at any moment, yet, paradoxically, he is often bored as he patrols the same streets, arresting the same criminals, seeing the courts release them almost immediately. His marriage often ends in divorce; he often succumbs to alcoholism, even suicide. Surrounded as he is by inhumanity, it is a terrible struggle for him to maintain his own humanity. He is sworn to protect the community but the community makes it almost impossible for him to do so because of ludicrous rules for obtaining evidence, incompetent supervision and general hostility. The worst of it is, no one except another police officer has any notion of how difficult his job is, or cares. The police officer holds society togetherat great personal cost, according to Wambaugh, but no one respects him for this.

Literary Precedents

The techniques Wambaugh uses can be traced to Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) who wrote with great realism about crime and the city. Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) too, was a master of graphic, even scatological description.

Charles Dickens's (1812-1870) novels often concerned crimes committed in an urban setting and described grotesque characters living in hideous slums. Wambaugh's novels are also similar to the writings of Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) who wrote about crime and the seamier side of the American city with great realism in An American Tragedy, and James T. Farrell (1904-1979),a contemporary writer, who dissected the slums on the South Side of Chicago in his 1930s Studs Lonigan trilogy. Wambaugh is in the tradition of those novelists who write realistically about the sordid side of city life and those who must cope with it.

Related Titles

Although Wambaugh's major theme, the difficult necessity of policework and the toll it takes on police officers, remains the same from work to work, his novels have evolved. In The Blue Knight (1972), the reader accompanies Bumper Morgan on his rounds during what are supposed to be his last three days of duty before retirement. He is an excellent police officer, but the system, and the city, seem intent on breaking him. Like all heroes, he is rough with evildoers and kind to the weak. Unlike the stereotypical hero, he is lonely even though a wonderful woman loves him; he suffers from nightmares and dyspepsia, feels displaced and can only find solace in drink.

The Choirboys (1975) focuses on the work of an assorted group of officers reminiscent of those in The New Centurions. Although this novel stresses the absurd side of police work, the efforts of those officers, some young, some nearing retirement, to overcome the excruciating emotional pain of their profession leads to tragedy.

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