

# No Future for Luana Short Guide

## No Future for Luana by August Derleth

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# Characters

The primary character in the Judge Peck mystery series is, of course, Judge Peck himself. He distinguishes himself as a character in *No Future for Luana* in the fact that he is old, wise and shrewd. He, like all detectives in the "Who-Done-It" tradition, is himself above suspicion and has earned the respect of all, although Meyers, the traditional dense district attorney, is always certain that this time he has the jump on the old judge.

In this mystery, as in several of his later works, Derleth gives Judge Peck a "Watson" in the tradition of Archie Goodwin in the Nero Wolf series. Like Archie, Lorin Fenner does much of the Judge's legwork; and, also like Archie, he is more perceptive than Sherlock Holmes's Dr. Watson. Still Derleth loses no opportunity to show the readers that the ratiocination of a Judge Peck is always superior to the observation of a "Watson."

Luana, the victim, is a beautiful woman in her fading years. While the theater company to which she belonged billed her as "The girl with a future," close observers know that she has no future in the theater, the murderer sees to it that she has no future in life, and her own misguided actions assured that she has no family future. All other characters are the traditional, sketchily developed suspects. Most have possible motives, most have opportunity, and many have the means. Only one, of course, can be proven to have done it.

## Social Concerns

The "hard-boiled" detective story which originated in the 1930s with Dashiell Hammett is usually a form for liberal social doctrine. The "Who-Donelt," of which *No Future for Luana* is a historically late example, on the other hand, is the detective fiction repository for conservative social thought. As in his *Sac Prairie* work and in his other Judge Peck mysteries, Derleth here is concerned with the status quo, with the need for a free people to have free use of fire arms to protect their property and their good names, with the idea that a criminal is a social abnormality which needs to be removed, and with the assumption that the victim deserves to be victimized. The detective in such a mystery serves to assure that property remains with those who worked for it, and that any interference with the assumptions of a capitalist, patriarchal society must be punished.

In this book and its counterparts, both English and American, there are no degrees of guilt or innocence, of right or wrong: Everything is clearcut.

Luana, the victim, was bad; her murderer, while not precisely evil, was not right in the head; and only Judge Peck was needed to see that these weeds were weeded out of the Wisconsin pastoral garden.



## Techniques

No Future for Luana is considered to have the tightest plot of any of the Judge Peck mysteries, and it probably does so because Derleth stuck scrupulously to the formula for a good mystery outlined in W. H. Auden's famous essay, "The Guilty Vicarage." To begin with, Derleth set the mystery in a tightly "closed society." The only possible suspects are members of a traveling theater company which has stopped briefly in Sac Prairie, and members of Luana's Sac Prairie family to whom Judge Peck is quick to see the victim's resemblance. Derleth allows no opportunity for a casual outsider to have committed the murder.

Both the theater company and Sac Prairie are clearly Edenic settings in which a murder is out of place. The company has visited Sac Prairie annually for years so that its owners are familiar to townspeople and especial friends of Judge Peck. The company is, for its members, both a springboard for the talented to move on to fame and fortune and a haven for actors who are good, but not good enough. Many times, readers are reminded that the company is family for its members. In this family, Luana is a "bad apple."

Always stirring up conflict, frequently demanding special privileges, she has earned none of the respect of her fellow players. Two ingenue players have enough talent and ambition to take her place, and they need only Luana's absence to get their chance. Thus, the victim is no loss to the community, and, as readers learn, she is no loss to her family either.

The murder is perpetrated by a character neither readers nor the other characters admire, and he is the "least likely suspect" circling the action and making seemingly irrelevant comments until Judge Peck exposes his guilt, thus restoring Eden to its primal innocence.



# Themes

Like the Sac Prairie books, this mystery is set in Sac Prairie, an earthly version of Eden. Only the perpetrators of crimes and the victims of those crimes mar an otherwise healthy and vigorous plantation of good country people. The wise detective, Judge Peck, is there to restore the Edenic paradise.

In *No Future for Luana*, Sac Prairie is made up of good people; the bad ones, Luana for instance, leave home never realizing that it is paradise. When they return, if they are contrite, they may rejoin the community. But, if they return as Luana did, to rob the community further, they die justifiably.

While in other Judge Peck mysteries the judge's particular legal knowledge aids him in solving the mystery and, more important, in bringing the correct suspect to justice, in *No Future for Luana* the judge makes his deductions based on his personal shrewdness and his extensive knowledge of the Sac Prairie region and its people.

## Literary Precedents

Here again, Edgar Allen Poe is the obvious grandfather to Derleth's Judge Peck mysteries. Like many of his predecessors, Derleth borrowed from Poe the use of an assistant/narrator, the importance of ratiocination to crime solving, the retired person who solves crimes as a hobby, and so on. A more recent predecessor in the mystery genre to which the Judge Peck stories belong is John Dickson Carr with his Gideon Fell series; and, of course, Judge Peck was a contemporary of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Peck would seem to be a cross between those two, borrowing the universal respect and ratiocination from Poirot, and the intimate and gossipy knowledge of a small geographic region from Marple.



## Related Titles

Derleth's other Judge Peck mysteries include *Murder Stalks the Wakely Family* (1934); *The Man on All Fours* (1934); *Three Who Died* (1935); *Sign of Fear* (1936); *Sentence Deferred* (1939); *The Narracong Riddle* (1940); *The Seven Who Waited* (1945); *Mischief in the Lane* (1945); *Fell Purpose* (1953). In addition, Derleth developed Solar Pons in the Sherlock Holmes tradition. When he was nineteen, Derleth wrote Arthur Conan Doyle, inquiring whether he intended to write any more Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Receiving Doyle's assurance that he did not, the young writer developed his own heir to the Holmes mantle and proceeded to write a series of Solar Pons mysteries which have been gathered into nine collections. He also wrote one Solar Pons novel, *Mr. Fairlie's Final Journey*, but gave up the longer format. In all of the stories, Derleth unabashedly and skillfully imitates the Doyle style and technique, changing only minor details: Dr.

Watson becomes Dr. Parker, 221 B Baker Street becomes No. 7 B Praed Street, and Solar Pons uses the term "Elementary" far more than Holmes ever did. Derleth made several other ventures into the mystery genre. Notable among these is *Consider Your Verdict: Ten Coroner's Cases for You to Solve*, a collection of puzzlers in which the reader is asked to identify the mistaken testimony in each case. *Wisconsin Murders* (1968) is a collection of true crime cases in Wisconsin. The Introduction to this book is important in that in it, Derleth states the social concerns he implies elsewhere: that those who would sympathize with perpetrators because of their backgrounds, and thus minimize their guilt, are "gullible and sentimental." For Derleth it seems, there is bad and there is good and no space for uncertainty in between.





# 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