

# Nocturne Short Guide

## Nocturne by Ed McBain and Evan Hunter

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# Characters

As with all the 87th Precinct novels, indeed with most series fiction, the reappearance of a set of familiar characters provides part of the pleasure of reading the successive novels. We come to know the individual traits of the recurring members of the 87th and their families, girl and boy friends, and even some of the fringe characters in the series. However, most of the characters in the 87th Precinct novels appear only once, and they vary from novel to novel. They usually are those caught up in the police investigation: victims, suspects, witnesses, and criminals. Once in a while, McBain develops characters that prove sufficiently resilient that he may bring them back in a future novel. For example, McBain infrequently brings back his arch criminal, the Deaf Man, who has so far eluded the best efforts of the squad to capture him.

The central character in the 87th Precinct books is Detective Steve Carella, who has been in the series since the beginning. He is married to the beautiful but deaf and mute Teddy, and the couple have twins, April and Mark. Although from time to time we hear about the private lives of other members of the series, it is Steve Carella's family that remains the most prominent.

The composition of the 87th has changed over the years as officers are killed or transferred or otherwise leave the squad. There is, however, a core which remains. And as the series has developed McBain features the more important individual detectives in each of the books. In *Nocturne*, it is Carella and Cotton Hawes. They pick up the original call, and they follow the investigation through to its conclusion. There is a minor subplot which involves Carella's personal life. His son Mark is ill and runs a high fever, so Steve periodically checks in with his housekeeper, Fanny, or his wife to find out how the boy is getting along. Other familiar figures in *Nocturne* are the comedy team of Monroe and Monaghan, a sort of Abbott and Costello of the Isola Police Department. McBain has used them frequently in the past to provide comic relief and as foils for the far more competent detectives of the 87th. There are also Sam Grossman, the forensics specialist, a racist cop named Parker, and Detective Oliver "Ollie" Weeks, an overweight slob of a policeman who is nonetheless an effective investigator. Aside from a brief appearance by one of the department's informers, Danny Gimp, the rest of the cast of characters in *Nocturne* probably will appear in the series for only this one time.

First is the murdered woman who begins the chain of events that the story traces. She is the once-famous Russian concert pianist Svetlana Dyalovich who was living under her married name of Helder. She has an estranged daughter, Maria, who lives in London and plays no part in the investigation. However her granddaughter, Priscilla Stetson, a lounge singer at the Cafe Mouton in the Powell Hotel, does. Priscilla has a rather strange relationship with two goonish bodyguards, Georgie and Tony, who seem to accompany her everywhere, and although they have nothing to do with the murder, they do figure in another scam involving some money the victim left Priscilla.

A second set of characters becomes involved as the police trace the murder weapon, a .38 Smith & Wesson. First there is Rodney Pratt, a limo driver, who has car trouble



and leaves his limousine to be serviced at a station just off the Majesta Bridge. The gun he keeps in his glove compartment is stolen by a bird handler involved in cock fighting, Jose Santiago. He sells the gun to a man he meets in The Juice Bar who turns out to be the killer, an immigrant Italian fish seller with the unpronounceable name of Lorenzo Schiavinato.

The third plot line involves three prep school boys who are out on the town looking for a good time. They are all named Richard: Richard Hopper, Coeur de Lion; Richard Weinstock, Richard the Second; Richard O'Connor, Richard the Third. The trio attend Pierce Academy, play football, and have been accepted to Harvard. As they drift one evening to Diamondback, the heart of the black district of Isola, looking for a hooker, they encounter a fourth Richard, family name Cooper. The fourth Richard is a dope dealer and pimp, and he sets the boys up with one of his girls, Yolande, aka Yolande Marie Marx, a nice Jewish girl from Cleveland who now feeds her drug habit by hooking for Richard Cooper.

The cast of characters is rounded out by a number of minor but arresting cameos played by Max Liebowitz, an old-fashioned cabby who actually knows the city, Svetlana's kindly neighbor, Karen, and assorted lowlifes and petty crooks, doormen, and other urban types who supply clues for the police to follow.

As with all of the 87th Precinct books, McBain provides a cosmopolitan cast of characters which mirrors the diversity of the urban world and contributes to the density of the series' atmosphere. His characters move across ethnic, social, and economic boundaries, and everyone of them is carefully and individually drawn.



## Social Concerns

As with all of the 87th Precinct novels, *Nocturne* deals with urban America and in particular New York City. Even though the setting for the books is the fictional Isola, they are really based on McBain's knowledge of and experience in New York. The social concerns of the series are those of almost any urban-based crime fiction: the role of the police, the increasing violence of American city life, shifts in ethnic populations, the changing nature of metropolitan crime, and the general decay of modern society in the United States. For the past fortysome years, McBain has chronicled these social issues in the pages of his 87th Precinct series which now number over three dozen individual books.

As life in modern cities has evolved, so has the role of metropolitan police departments. Not only has their job become more difficult because of increases in urban criminal activity but also because crime has become more vicious and dealing with it more dangerous. Where street violence was once more or less restricted to poor, often ethnic ghettos, it is now more widespread. Muggings in so-called "safe" neighborhoods have increased and once-protected buildings have become more vulnerable. Where previously the crooks, especially street punks, were by and large outgunned by the police, now the reverse is often the case. The increased availability of high-power automatic weapons has expanded exponentially the dangers of police work. The presence of specialized units within the police departments such as riot squads, SWAT teams, and the increasing dependence on forensics, computers, and other scientific methods of crime detection have also altered the traditional ways police departments operate.

However, while McBain has kept abreast of such changes, the 87th Precinct books are not techno-novels. He is not obsessed as some crime writers like Tom Clancy are with the technology of detection. As they are in real life, most of the investigations pursued in his novels rely as much on shoe leather and old-fashioned, time-consuming procedures in which the individual detective's intuition and intimate knowledge of criminal behavior play a central role. Psychology is as important as hard science in preventing crime and solving cases.

As the dangers on the streets have expanded, so too have the caution and wariness of the city's inhabitants. Urban life is simply more precarious now than it used to be. The population of Isola lives in a more fearful world, and that shows up in the general level of anxiety they exhibit toward each other and toward the police. Individuals are often reluctant to volunteer help to an on-going criminal investigation. They do not want to become involved because they may endanger their own lives. Many people now live in security-minded enclaves behind triple locked doors, with unlisted phone numbers, and rely on answering machines to screen their contact with the outside world. More people carry guns or Mace or some other means of self-protection.

Cars come equipped with cell phones and automatic locks. The general level of personal freedom has declined in real life, and McBain's novels reflect this.



In spite of this social paranoia, McBain's *Isola* provides a rich environment, one that draws those with ambition and in search of all the advantages of the traditional urban world with its mix of races, accumulation of wealth and power, cultural opportunities, and social diversity. While McBain does not minimize the city's dangers, he does not portray the city as unremittingly negative either. His *Isola* is not the ever hopeless, darkening nether world which is often the mainstay of modern crime novelists. There is still a place for love and compassion and neighborliness—and humor—amid the violence and disintegration. His is a balanced view of contemporary urban American life.

Like New York City, *Isola* also reflects the changes in ethnic migration since World War II. While once the city seemed dominated by the turn-of-the-century groups like the Irish, Italians, and Eastern-European Jews, with a smattering of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, now Carella and company deal with an increasingly broader spectrum of ethnic and religious populations: Russians, Rastafarians, peoples from the Indian sub-continent, South Americans, and Asians of all sorts. In *Nocturne* for example, McBain has an old-fashioned Jewish cab driver, a recent Italian immigrant, African-Americans of all sorts both bad and good, hard-working and criminal, a Russian emigre, a Haitian practitioner of voodoo and a Latino devotee of cockfighting.

It is this combination of characters that gives the 87th Precinct novels much of their engaging social density. *Isola* teems with a variety of peoples and each brings diverse religious and cultural traditions to the urban mix. This mix also provides McBain with an opportunity to exercise his keen ear for dialogue. One of the special achievements of the books is the sound of the language used by the various characters. For example, characters are as often identifiable by the distinctive cadences of what they say as by their descriptions. And McBain is just as skilled in discerning the nuances of language among the various members of the white population as among the more exotic nonwhite characters. The careful reader can always detect class, social position, and place of origin in the novel's talk.

As the current statistics in criminal activity suggest, crime changes with the nature of the motivation for committing it. If "crack," with its intense, short-lived high, is now the drug of choice, that will be reflected in the drop in the number of thefts which require the thief to seek more complicated means of getting the money for the next fix. And with increasing competition for drug dollars, the more traditional sources of criminal control like the Mafia have lost their monopoly over the supply of drugs. Competition, as in other walks of American business, has gone international. The South American cartels now exert as much influence on the dope trade as once did the Sicilians, Irish, and Jews over the distribution of alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. There are still many wise guys on the streets of *Isola*, but now they have to share the territory. Crime in America is an equal opportunity employer.

There is no question the 87th Precinct books reflect the increasing importance of the drug culture. Drugs simply drive the majority of modern-day urban crime.

And the amount of money is so large that it has also affected the police departments as well. Corruption has always been a concern for city police forces.



They constantly have to battle against it.

Now, with so much cash on the streets, the problem is bigger than ever. While it is not central to most of the 87th Precinct novels, it is a growing worry to officers and politicians in charge of the force.

Finally, even though McBain does not often give way to nostalgia for an urban life of the past, in many of the novels there is a general sense of regret over the loss of civic life: cab drivers who actually knew where they are going, the absence of a genuine sense of security and personal freedom, the collapse of older neighborhoods with their street-level communities. Such things seem increasingly of the past, and McBain brings them up from time to time. Of course, it is part of the reality of urban life, and moments of passing regret add to the tone of the books. But McBain handles these moments with caution. After all, the city does change; it is part of its nature. To spend too much time dwelling on the past would be as retrogressive as ignoring them altogether.

It is one of the achievements of the 87th Precinct series that it accurately portrays modern American society unflinchingly but fairly. Here is the totality of city life presented with compassion, understanding, and wit. In McBain's fiction it is neither the best nor the worst of times.



# Techniques

Although the 87th Precinct books constitute a series, they stand alone as individual novels. The characters remain pretty much the same and the location of the plots is always Isola and its several boroughs, but the way each volume is presented differs and this is the result of McBain's skill as a writer. In *Nocturne*, for example, McBain uses multiple, parallel story lines which crisscross throughout the narrative. It is like listening to a fugue with various themes which overlap, counterpoint and finally resolve at the end of the story.

The novel opens with an elderly woman found shot to death, along with her cat, on the threshold of her modest apartment. She is wearing a now decrepit, but once elegant, fur coat. Her apartment smells of fish and the detectives find bones and heads in the kitchen. It looks like another murder of one of the city's pathetic, perhaps slightly crazy, old ladies who is poor and alone. But the detectives also find a scrapbook full of faded newspaper clippings which trace the career of a celebrated concert pianist who was the toast of several continents and even played all of the cultural centers: New York, London, Paris, Rome. It turns out that the pathetic old woman was once one of the rich and famous. How she came to be in her present condition begins a second story line which leads the detectives to her granddaughter, Priscilla, from whom she has been estranged for some years. She is a nightclub singer who hangs out with some questionable people who will eventually involve her in a money scam linked to the inheritance left to her by her grandmother.

Meanwhile the police are tracing the whereabouts of the murder weapon found dumped in a storm sewer outside the murdered woman's apartment building. The search for the gun leads the detectives to a limo driver named Rodney Pratt and the discovery of some chicken feathers left in the leather-upholstered back seat of his limousine. Soon the detectives find themselves investigating the voodoo underworld, the denizens of the illicit sport of cock fighting, and a local fish market. Story piles on story and as the clues add up they begin to overlap, gradually constricting the number of possible suspects and driving the narrative to its conclusion and the resolving of the murder.

As with the other 87th Precinct novels, McBain has a number of running gags and themes which provide some comic relief and stitch together the various subplots. There are a series of movie references. Garbled titles, references to actors—one character describes a black man as resembling Morgan Fairchild when he obviously means Morgan Freeman—and there are several references to Alfred Hitchcock's classic motion picture *The Birds*. Various characters keep referring to Hitchcock as the author of the film, the one who wrote it. Of course, this is an in-joke. McBain under his real name of Evan Hunter wrote the screenplay for the film. Music also provides another of these motifs. Not only was the murdered woman a former concert pianist and her granddaughter a night club chanteuse, but the book is full of other musical references. This is not surprising since McBain once himself played piano in clubs.





McBain's style in *Nocturne* as in his other series books is wonderfully smooth, economical, and vivid. He has retained the ability to sketch a character in the fewest possible words and yet to have caught just the right tone and details to render him or her lifelike and memorable.

McBain uses this same direct, tight prose to capture just the right feel of the weather, in this case the bone-chilling cold of January in the northeast. The locale, too, is made notable without the unnecessary filler of so much genre fiction and film with their endless car chases and clotted description. The reader always knows exactly where the action is taking place; how long it is taking to get from one place to another; who is where in any scene.

McBain is also a master of dialogue.

There is no wordiness here: every line is on target, every speech reveals a bit more of a character, each exchange is counterpoint to another. A word dropped here, a detail dropped there eventually ties in with some larger aspect of the story line or provides drive for the narrative. No wonder that McBain/Hunter has been a much-sought-after writer for the screen.

In many of McBain's 87th Precinct novels he includes visual elements which give the books a concrete sense of reality.

Such visual information reflects his training as an artist. Sometimes they are facsimiles of various police forms and court documents or hand-written notes which reveal the character of the note's author.

In *Nocturne*, we find a replica of a 78 phonograph label from one of the records the police discover in the murdered woman's apartment. It is an old Victor disk with the dog looking into the speaker of an early roll-type playback machine.

The work is Paul Hindemith's 1922 *Suite* and the pianist is Svetlana Dyalovich, playing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. There is script lettering identifying a photo of Priscilla Stetson and the notice that she is "Now Appearing" at the Club Mouton. There are also a sign over a newspaper-lottery-coffee shop and several newspaper headlines. Finally, McBain includes the note in a rather spidery hand written by her grandmother to Priscilla instructing her where to look for her inheritance.

Such typographical and graphic interruptions of the text provide the reader with not only more factual information about the case but also with bits of visual detail that allow us to see in concrete ways the world of the detectives.

# Themes

The 87th Precinct novels contain a variety of themes which have varied over the years. In *Nocturne*, McBain focuses on aging and the faded hopes and misplaced dreams of the elderly, fractured family relationships, and the disappointments of the American Dream.

The murdered woman whose body is discovered at the opening of the novel, Mrs. Franz Helder nee Svetlana Dyalovich, is portrayed as much a victim of aging as of urban violence. Her hands are twisted by arthritis, and she is losing her hearing because of a brain tumor— infirmities made more tragic because of her former profession as a concert pianist. All that remains of her former fame is a scrapbook of faded clippings and recordings of her past performances. Since the death of her husband, she has been estranged from both her daughter and granddaughter. She dresses in her fading finery and drinks too much, often while listening to her old recordings. The only solace for her loneliness is an occasional glass of tea with Karen, her kindly neighbor. She had become a cliché; an impoverished old woman living alone with her cat.

Svetlana's isolation is a commonplace in the impersonal city, and it makes her vulnerable to being preyed on by the young Italian immigrant who eventually kills her. The microcosm of urban Isola contains many such individuals, and they are routinely featured in the series. However, one of the characteristics of the novels is that they trace the personal and social intercourse often missed by this kind of stereotypical situation. McBain is always careful to show how even amid the apparently uncaring city, there are connections among its residents: some warm and comforting, some potentially dangerous. It is always a side effect of the police investigations in the books that we are made privy to such interconnections and the city revealed as less impersonal and more human.

Family is also a constant theme in the 87th Precinct series, and Steve Carella's family provides a touchstone. As the series has progressed Steven meets Teddy, and they marry, set up a household, and have children. We also learn about Steve's family and witness the death of his father. No matter how horrendous the cases that Carella investigates, he always has his wife and children to return to. At the end of *Nocturne* we find him back in his apartment, his son recovering from an illness and his wife and daughter returning from shopping and April's dancing lesson. His family provides the one calm point in this policeman's life.

In contrast *Nocturne* also deals with the fractured family of Svetlana. The characters, whether among the police or the civilians, who are without families of their own, like Lorenzo, Karen, Yolande, and Priscilla, are vulnerable to loneliness, exploitation, and even death. It is the cumulative loss of family and the search for it that often motivates the action of these novels and frequently gives them a sense of humanity.

The failure of the American Dream, or at least its inability to provide happiness and fulfillment, is another of McBain's perennial themes. Lorenzo, Yolande, and Svetlana all



provide examples of how the idea of wealth and fame can both elude and destroy those who pursue them. Like millions before him Lorenzo has immigrated to America in search of a better life. Unable to speak English and lacking any discernibly marketable skills, he is reduced to working in a fish market for low wages. In an attempt to get rich quicker he gambles and his accumulating debts eventually lead him to the murder of Svetlana. He is a lost soul deprived of both country, family, and culture. He only dimly understands the new world he now inhabits. Fear of the bookie who threatens him drives him to contemplate actions to which he might otherwise never have resorted. He is an amateur criminal and even at the end of the narrative when he confesses to the murder, he appears not to fully comprehend what is happening to him.

Yolande has come to the city in part to escape her conventional Jewish upbringing back in Cleveland and in part to search for a more glamorous life. Again, her lack of skills and eventually her drug dependence push her into a life of prostitution. Like many other hookers, she sells sex to pay for her habit. Her death in a violent sexual encounter with the three preppies simply plays out the danger of her occupation. Sooner or later many women on the streets meet such an ugly end. Unlike Lorenzo she seems vaguely to be aware of the dangers lurking in the city, but she seems too locked into her dependency to be able to do much about it. The fast money and the fast fix dominate her life and lead to her brutal murder.

At first Svetlana's life is different from the other two. She does succeed. She becomes rich and famous and is celebrated for her talent. But that also fades and her inability to cope successfully with her fleeting fame and her personal failures as a mother and grandmother propel her into depression and death. Although it would appear that she should be able to better adjust to her changed life, she does not. She lives as a pauper in order to leave a quarter of a million dollars of guilt money to her granddaughter. In her later years she too appears unable to pull herself out of the spiral of loss and fear which also locked Yolande and Lorenzo into their defeatist lives.

The drive for money and what it purports to give to those who have it, which after all is the element which defines the American Dream, destroys all of these characters. In their lives of obsession they circle ever downward as they disintegrate into self-destructive behavior. In McBain's world, wealth never promotes genuine happiness. It is other things such as the warm human interaction of Carella's family that are ultimately important.

# Adaptations

Many of McBain's crime novels have been filmed both as Hollywood and as made-for-television movies. In fact, several of the 87th Precinct books were broadcast recently as a miniseries of sorts on television. Perhaps this is because writing under his real name of Evan Hunter, McBain has scripted widely for the screen and some of his skills as a writer of dialogue and creator of individual scenes is evident from his fiction.

Even those books which have not been adapted remain eminently cinematic.

Nocturne, however, has not yet appeared as a film.



## Key Questions

All of the dozens of the novels in the 87th Precinct police series deal in varying ways with urban social problems, and as American society has changed, McBain has shifted the social focus of the books.

The latest, *Nocturne*, is no exception. We find in his fictional Isola a microcosm of present-day New York City with its fluctuating ethnic mix, big-city environment, and ever-present crime. McBain is a writer of such skill that he routinely folds the weather, the setting, and the racial characters into the narrative in ways that far exceed the usual background use of such elements in crime fiction. The bone-chilling cold of a January day in the city is never just a throw-away bit of fictional detail, because the weather is always of central importance in the 87th Precinct books and often substantially shapes the narrative. The same can be said for the urban environs and the particular ethnic characteristics of his players.

McBain's police novels are of a piece; their component parts are finely integrated into a satisfyingly whole.

The questions that can be asked of these crime books hinge on one another.

What may at first blush appear quite trivial often is of major importance. In *Nocturne*, a dead cat is discovered beside the body of a murdered woman. The cat, like the woman, has been shot by a .38.

What might have been a disposable bit of detail used for comic effect—who would shoot a cat for God's sake?—later turns out to be a valuable piece of information for unraveling the plot and for understanding the motivation of the killer.

The following questions then were formulated with McBain's careful attention to detail in mind, and with a recognition that in his fictional universe everything is of importance.

1. Think about the way the weather works in the novel not only to provide a "chilling" atmosphere for the story but also to define character or develop action.

For example, characters are frequently identified by what they are wearing, like scarves, coats, and gloves. One person is made nervous by men who wear hats. A central clue is developed by the fishy smell clinging to the fur coat worn by the murdered woman. The preppies are traced by their school jackets. So how does "weather" work in the book?

2. As the plot drives forward, the environs of the city provide a way to link together various strands of the action.

How does McBain use the city streets to do this?

3. Because a city is made up of various kinds of buildings, offices, apartment dwellings, night clubs, and businesses, authors using the city as a locale can rely on a variety of



structures, both inside and outside, within which and around which to set the action of the plot. How does McBain do this in *Nocturne*?

4. How do the various ethnic groups provide the story with its density? Tensions? Interactions?

5. Because McBain has written so many 87th Precinct novels, he often counts on our knowledge of other volumes in the series for background in each individual book. If you are familiar with the series, discuss how he does this without becoming boringly repetitious.

6. The 87th Precinct novels often have a motif around which a portion of the plot revolves. In *Nocturne*, we have the references to the movies. How do they figure in the story? Since McBain, himself, has written for the films and has had a number of his books turned into films, this motif bears a multiple significance.

7. Music provides another of these motifs. Notice how central to the story are the references to music. What is their purpose in the story?

8. One of the ways this particular novel is structured is around what is described as "The tale of the gun." The search for the source of the murder weapon is one of the linking devices McBain uses to glue the narrative together. How does he use this particular device in this novel?

9. As a literary work *Nocturne* relies on a circular plot in which each of the various stories in the narrative neatly leads into another. Discuss how this structural element affords the tale its continuity.

10. Although *Nocturne* is a crime novel and therefore involves a search for a killer, notice how carefully and economically McBain creates character, how each of the figures in the story is individualized through small details and idiosyncratic patterns of behavior. Pick a couple of the characters and examine how they are created, what the author says about them, and what specifics make up their personalities.

## Literary Precedents

Even though McBain is now one of the most celebrated authors of the police novel, he did not invent the genre, and it might be helpful to look at other American police novels and their European counterparts in order to get a perspective on his series. The work of Joseph Wambaugh, James Ellroy, and even Tony Hillerman provide exemplary examples of similar but differently cast views of modern police forces. Wambaugh's novels are grittier and more violent and routinely deal with the corruption in contemporary police departments. James Ellroy wrote several novels about the Los Angeles Police Department in the 1940s and early 1950s that have a period flavor. They, too, are harder-edged and are meaner works of fiction, and Ellroy's cops are more difficult to like. Unlike the members of the 87th, they are loose cannons in need of restraint. Tony Hillerman has created a unique series featuring the Navajo policemen Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee and his novels rely heavily on their Southwestern setting and the ethnic particularity of the characters for their impact as novels. However, these books began a trend in police fiction of featuring small-town or rural police departments which has spread across the country and now encompass dozens of series featuring local law enforcement agencies.

The police novel actually began in Europe where police departments first arose amid the expanding urban centers of Great Britain and on the continent.

Among other Victorian writers, Charles Dickens exploited the role of the policeman in his novels like *Bleak House* (1852-1853) and the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Probably the most famous modern writer of police fiction, however, was the prolific Belgian writer Georges Simenon, whose *Inspector Maigret* series still enjoys a wide audience. Like McBain, Simenon wrote his books over several decades and through dozens of novels explored urban crime in Paris and its environs. Using an ensemble cast of characters the *Maigret* books offer a close examination of French society and its crimes. Of more recent note are the ten *Martin Beck* books by the Swedish husband and wife writing-team of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo. These books take a particularly grim look at the decaying social world of modern-day Sweden, especially in Stockholm.

Examining any of these other police series can offer many points of comparison to McBain's series. The writing quality of all of them is extremely high, and although they may be set in different locales and within different social situations, they can furnish a set of other novels with which to judge McBain's achievements in the 87th Precinct books.

## Related Titles

Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novels now comprise the longest sustained series in American crime fiction, and from the beginning he envisioned the books as a continuing, interrelated group of stories.

Given this history, it is hard not to read each new addition as a continuation of those novels which have gone before. So one of the more instructive ways to look at *Nocturne* would be to compare it with novels from the series in any of the past five decades over which the series has been written.

Because the 87th Precinct series now has been running since the early 1950s, McBain has worked out an ingenious way to deal with the passing of time in the books. If he followed a strict chronology, obviously the detectives like Steve Carella, who has been featured in the books since their inception, would now be in their seventies, well past retirement age. Carella's children themselves could be grandparents. So what McBain has done is to more or less freeze the ages of his characters while allowing the social time frame to advance. For example, the ethnic mix varies with the decades. In *Nocturne*, one of the characters remarks that it is now unusual to see a Jewish cabby, as was once the case, because most Isola cab drivers are now from other ethnic backgrounds. And black characters are playing a more central role than they once did, both as police officers and as criminals, which mirrors the reality of the urban crime scene.

So, too, the physical nature of the city has changed. The squad room is fixed with the same green walls, same scarred desks, same bad coffee. But the other buildings of the city in which the events of the narrative take place have altered.

Once relatively upscale places have succumbed to urban blight. Neighborhoods ebb and flow with the populations that inhabit them. Building security that might originally have been relaxed has grown tighter as the threat of crime has spread.

Once safe areas are now less so and the civilian population behaves accordingly.

The nature of crime also has undergone a transformation. Where earlier gangs sported black leather jackets and carried knives or the occasional zip gun, now they are equipped with Uzis and other high-powered ordinance. Rumbles over turf have been replaced by drive-by shootings and mob-style hits and guerrilla street wars. Random crime has increased.

Where criminal activity was once fairly well restricted to determined locales and to specific ethnic and social groups, it has crept beyond these boundaries into the secure havens of the middle and uppermiddle classes. Drugs dominate the crime world, and the amount of money involved is astronomical.



In spite of these changes, however, McBain focuses in each of his novels on specific, carefully delineated individuals, which he painstakingly develops. His books are not about statistics but are about human beings. The rich and powerful, the poor and defenseless are equally trapped in his world of urban violence.



# 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