

The Old Contemptibles Short Guide

The Old Contemptibles by Martha Grimes

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Old Contemptibles Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	8
Related Titles.....	9
Copyright Information.....	10



Characters

The most prominent returning characters in *The Old Contemptibles* are Richard Jury and Melrose Plant. Some of the characters from Jury's personal and professional life — Wiggins, Racer, Carole-anne, Mrs. Wasserman, Jenny Kennington — appear less prominently in this novel. Also briefly appearing are many of Melrose's fellow inhabitants of Long Piddleton, including Marshall Trueblood, Vivian Rivington, and Theo Wrenn Browne.

The most vividly depicted characters who appear for the first time in this novel are the elderly and the young.

The elderly characters are Adam Holdsworth and Lady Cray, who meet at a "retirement home" called Castle Howe. Adam, age eighty-nine, is confined to a wheelchair but is mentally unaffected by age. Lady Cray arrives at Castle Howe as eager to be away from her family as Adam is from him; ironically, both believe that the institution provides better care and greater independence than their relatives. Lady Cray is a kleptomaniac, and her problem becomes important in the solution of the crimes.

The two children are typical of Grimes's young characters: intelligent and resourceful, they experience great sorrow at an early age. Alex Holdsworth, Jane's son and Adam's great-grandson and dearly loved by both, first appears as the mastermind of two ingenious gambling scams. Only sixteen and a schoolboy, Alex is not interested in personal gain but is concerned about his mother's financial situation.

Alex returns home to find his mother dead and has the presence of mind to call and then escape from the police, hoping to prove that his mother's death was the result of murder rather than suicide.

Alex is assisted by the other child, Millie Thale. Millie is only eleven but is serving as the Holdsworths' cook; apparently without their knowledge, she is doing most of the work of the untalented adult cook. Millie's mother, the Holdsworths' previous cook, had died five years previously. Like Alex's mother and father, she was an apparent suicide, and in fact it was Millie's mother who found the body of Alex's father three weeks before her own death.

Social Concerns

This novel returns to familiar concerns of the series, particularly the related issues of justice and responsibility for others. Murder, Grimes again shows, may take place in the past but it continues to affect the present and must therefore be uncovered. Jury is unable to solve a current mysterious death, or even to determine whether it was murder, without first solving equally mysterious events in the past.

Also Grimes continues to show that murder has many victims, and in this novel the two (unrelated) children are orphaned and in danger because of a murderer's actions.

Other social concerns are mental illness and its treatment. Two of the characters are psychiatrists, but neither is effective and one grossly abuses doctor-patient relationships for personal gain. Suicide resulting from depression is suspected in the case of several characters, and in a lighter vein, the humorous character Lady Cray is a kleptomaniac.

Grimes is always interested in characters who might be discriminated against for some reason, such as youth, age, or nationality, and frequently shows through those characters the unfairness of such discrimination. In this novel an admirable if minor character is disabled as a result of an automobile accident. Her matter-of-fact, even cheerful, acceptance of her many problems contrasts sharply with the manner in which many of the other characters handle adversity.



Techniques

In this novel, the most highly praised and popular of the series, Grimes uses the same basic techniques of her previous novels but achieves greater depth by use of related scenes and characters. A unique feature is the use of a "disguised" Melrose Plant.

The use of related scenes and characters begins with the novel's prologue.

Carole-anne Palutski, Jury's young neighbor who appears throughout the series, is shopping with Jury for "antique" jewelry when Jury first meets Jane Holdsworth. Grimes establishes a number of complex relationships in this brief scene. First, it foreshadows the scene in the fifth chapter in which Jury is shopping for a genuine antique, an engagement ring for Jane. Also, Carole-anne notices Jane before Jury meets her and compares her with Jury's past romantic interest, Susan, called "SB-slash-H" by Carole-anne, who dislikes all of Jury's women and reduces them to their initials. Jury himself in the prologue makes several references, mental and verbal, to his romantic past. This idea is also repeated in the antique jewelry store scene, in which the only other customer proves to be Jenny Kennington.

Lady Kennington is an important character in *The Anodyne Necklace* (1983) and appears or at least is mentioned throughout the rest of the series; she and Jury seem interested in and suited for each other but are kept apart by bad timing. Thus, Grimes in an opening scene of a few pages is able to establish numerous relationships of characters and ideas.

Another of the novel's techniques is the use of Melrose Plant, Jury's unofficial assistant, as a "plant" in the Holdsworths' Lake District home. He is hired as a librarian to catalogue the family library, but of course his real job is to do detective work for Jury. Plant serves numerous functions in the series, but this undercover use of his character is unique and allows Jury — and more importantly, the reader — an inside look at the home of many of the suspects. Jury is not only grieving over Jane's death but is himself a suspect; he remains in London for more than threefourths of the novel. The use of the two settings with detective work going on in each adds to the novel's suspense.

Themes

While many other detective novelists employ the "murder will out" theme, Grimes's theme instead is "murder must out." Unsolved crimes from the past in this novel have effects that carry over into the next generation and cause even more crimes. The apparent suicide of Jane Holdsworth at the beginning of the novel seems unmotivated by the events of her life immediately preceding her death; only through exploring her past and that of her late husband's family can Jury make sense of her death. The shooting of the murderer by family members of her victims is a primitive, personal sort of justice, "rough justice" as one of the characters calls it. The crimes are viewed as being against the family rather than against society.



Key Questions

As this novel is part of a series, many of the ideas for discussions are covered in the analysis of *The Man With a Load of Mischief*. Below are some additional discussion topics for this particular novel in the series.

1. Melrose Plant and Marshall Trueblood continue in this novel their attempts to stop Vivian Rivington's wedding. What effect do their efforts have?
2. Grimes's characterization of children is often praised, and child characters are particularly prominent in *The Old Contemptibles*. What makes these children appealing?
3. Does Grimes assume that the reader is familiar with her previous novels, or is this one completely understandable to a reader unfamiliar with the rest of the series?
4. What is the purpose of the many references to the Lake Poets: do they merely provide local color, or do they have greater significance?
5. Many minor, recurring characters appear or at least are mentioned throughout the novel. Does the reader familiar with the series welcome such references, or do they become confusing?
6. Despite the many romantic possibilities suggested in this novel, Jury and Plant remain bachelors. Would the marriage of either or both of these characters affect the series? How?
7. Is the murderer's motivation clear and persuasive?
8. Does the novel's conclusion provide a satisfying ending, or is it disappointing or anticlimactic?

Literary Precedents

In addition to the precedents in *The Man with a Load of Mischief* (1981; please see separate entry), this novel has literary precedents to which its characters allude. The first is Wilkie Collins's classic mystery novel *The Woman in White* (1859), the title character of which Jury recalls when he first sees Jane Holdsworth. Jane, wearing a white raincoat in the fog, seems mysterious to Jury, and she remains mysterious to him throughout the brief affair that ends with her death.

The novel is set in England's Lake District and is filled with allusions to the Romantic poets who celebrated its beauty. At the end of the novel, Melrose Plant compares the murderer to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Geraldine in *Christabel* (1816); Geraldine is the embodiment of evil who destroys the innocence of *Christabel*.

Related Titles

The Old Contemptibles is the eleventh Richard Jury novel. It most closely resembles Jerusalem Inn (1984), which also begins with a Jury romance ended by the woman's death which he then investigates, and has similar orphan characters.



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

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994