

The Private Practice of Michael Shayne Short Guide

The Private Practice of Michael Shayne by Brett Halliday

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Characters/Literary Precedents

The Private Practice of Michael Shayne includes most of the characters that were to become stock in the Shayne saga. Shayne is tough and fearless, and his reputation is that of taking any job for a high fee; the unfolding case shows this to be inaccurate. This tough, seemingly immoral character sounds much like Hammett's Sam Spade.

Mike's love for a woman in this and later novels and his loyalty to friend Kincaid, however, are softening qualities not to be found in Spade. A scene at a bar, the Round-Up, in which Shayne, in an attempt to get information repeatedly goes back inside to be beaten again and again, is reminiscent of the beating scene in Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1931), although less brutal.

Also appearing prominently in this novel is Phyllis Brighton, whom Shayne asks to marry him. In later novels Shayne does marry Phyllis, but she dies in childbirth, leaving room for the development of the Lucy Hamilton character and Shayne's involvement with other females in the course of his work. Phyllis first appears in *Dividend on Death*, the first Shayne novel.

Peter Painter, the haughty police detective who hates Shayne, and Will Gentry, the head of Miami police detectives who is Shayne's friend and ally, also appear in this novel. Tim Rourke, the reporter who often aids Shayne, is introduced in this case. The Miami setting is also important; most of the Shayne cases are set in Miami with Shayne's apartment on Flagler Street often playing a role in the events.



Social Concerns/Themes

This novel is Halliday's second Mike Shayne tale and the first to gain major popular interest. As with most detective fiction, particularly from a beginning writer hoping to earn a living at this trade, this story is not primarily concerned with making a point; the writer is attempting to tell a good story. And Halliday does that here. A general concern is with man's greed and the depths to which men will sink in pursuit of their greed. One of the characters has fixed a horse race and in order to hide his guilt kills two men, whom he considers of little worth since he paid them to do his dirty work. A city councilman who also runs a gambling establishment (where the games are rigged) is willing to imprison his daughter who saw the murders to keep her quiet and protect his interest in the horse affair. Both the murderer and the councilman covering up the murders were important figures in Miami's society, therefore demonstrating a general flaw in the system.

One of Shayne's close friends is a victim, a lawyer named Larry Kincaid.

At the beginning of the story Shayne attempts to convince Larry not to get mixed up with unsavory types, and then when Larry turns up missing after the first murder is discovered, Shayne tries to keep Larry's name out of the investigation, to Shayne's own detriment. Personal and professional loyalty are recurring themes in Mike Shayne stories.

Techniques

The case is interesting because of the well-drawn characters and Shayne's relationships with them. Shayne has romantic interest in Phyllis Brighton and a previous interest in Helen Kincaid, the current wife of his friend Larry. Shayne's loyalty to Larry keeps getting him further and further implicated in the murder and Peter Painter is intent on pinning the murder on Shayne. These relationships keep the suspense alive in the story.

Adaptations

This was the first Brett Halliday novel to be made into a motion picture.

From 1941 to 1947 there were twelve Mike Shayne movies in all; the first seven starred Lloyd Nolan as Shayne, and in the last five Hugh Beaumont played the lead. In 1945 there was a radio program, Michael Shayne, Private Detective, which featured Jeff Chandler.

A television program about the adventures of Shayne appeared in 1960 starring Richard Denning.



Related Titles

A Taste for Violence (1949) is one of the Shayne stories set somewhere other than Miami; the setting here is a small fictional mining town in eastern Kentucky. Although the town of Centerville is fictional, Harlan county where Centerville is located is real. The story revolves around a company-run town in the throes of a miners' strike. A liberal owner is about to take control of the mines on his thirtieth birthday and will likely accede to many of the miners' demands.

The owner is murdered the day before his birthday, after having contacted Shayne by letter because of his fear for his life. The small Kentucky town is depicted clearly as a community of haves and have-nots: The mine owners and their cronies run everything, including the police; and the miners and their families are beaten into submission, hopeless and resigned. Davis Dresser's sympathies are clearly with the miners, and the novel presents a fairly accurate picture of such a community in the 1940s. The corruption is rampant, with the murdered mine owner and the leader of the striking miners appearing to be the only socially concerned, good characters in the town. Later the strike leader also turns out to be corrupt, underscoring the ubiquitous nature of corruption.

Corrupt society is a typical theme of hard-boiled detective fiction; in this Shayne story, the Kentucky setting and concern with the plight of coal miners is distinctive and well handled.

The major theme of *A Taste for Violence* is the widespread nature of corruption in modern American society.

The chief of police coldly murders one of his men he suspects of disloyalty.

The newspaper owner and editor prints only what is "approved" news. The restaurant owners report drunk patrons to the police for a cut of the fine. Ultimately, Shayne discovers that the courageous, charismatic strike leader has sold out the miners for money. It takes an outsider, Mike Shayne, to break the cycle of corruption and show the people that the situation can change for the better. However, even Mike uses violence and deceit to bring about this change.

Capitalism is mentioned several times as the root of all this evil. The mine owners repeatedly call the strike leaders "commies" and insist that giving into the miners' demands will undermine American capitalism. The owners and others on their side often refer to themselves as "businessmen," implying the inherent corrupt nature of business.

The main character is, of course, Mike Shayne. He is as always tough, insightful, and cynical, although he becomes touched by the conditions under which these coal miners must live and incensed by the police corruption found in Centerville. His concern is so intense that he briefly becomes Chief of Police himself while cleaning up the town.



Lucy Hamilton, Shayne's secretary, has come with him to Kentucky and plays an unusually active role in helping him solve the case. Typical of detective fiction of this period, her role is to use her good looks to gain information; but as always, Lucy's virtue is intact at the end of the story. However, in comparison to most of the women in Centerville, Lucy appears sophisticated and worldly.

Most of the other characters in the novel are either the greedy, corrupt "businessmen," the downtrodden miners, or those caught in-between trying to play both sides. Of particular interest is Ann Cornell, a woman of questionable reputation. Ann is primarily concerned with her own survival, but she vents her hostility toward men on a pathetic drug addict whom she has taken in. These characters are particularly reminiscent of Dinah Brand and Dan Rolff from Hammett's first novel *Red Harvest* (1929).

The plot of this novel is relatively tight for a hard-boiled detective story.

Clues are revealed to the reader as they are to Shayne and the conclusion is plausible and supportive of the writer's purpose. The story opens with two chapters set in Kentucky, focusing on Charles Roche, the soon-to-be owner whose sympathies are with the miners.

Roche and his partying, eastern wife Elsa are interesting characters and along with the exotic setting catch the reader's interest. When Shayne arrives in town, he and the reader learn about Roche's murder from the newspaper account, a technique that not only provides the basic facts, but later allows the reader to see how the newspaper and corrupt police work together.

The remainder of the case follows usual form, with Shayne interviewing, offending, lying to, concealing information from, and otherwise stirring up the town in order to get the facts he needs to crack the case.

Although this story is representative of the hard-boiled detective genre generally, it is specifically similar to Dashiell Hammett's first novel *Red Harvest* (1929). *Red Harvest* is a story of a corrupt town that the Continental Op cleans up through much violence, both his own and that of the men running the town, Personville. The Ann Cornell and Angus characters, as well as the corrupt newspaper owner are almost exact borrowings from Hammett. However, Halliday's novel is less violent and the ending more positive, which make for a weaker statement about the corrupt, violent nature of society.



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