

Playing Murder Short Guide

Playing Murder by Sandra Scoppettone

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Overview

Readers who like the challenge of solving a murder will find this skillfully plotted novel an exciting one.

However, of even greater interest is Scoppettone's handling of her main character, the would-be detective Anna Parker, who must discard her own stereotypical attitudes as she learns that the victim, whom she had idealized, was not the person she thought him to be. In the course of making this discovery, she realizes the psychological complexity of the suspects whose possible motives for murdering her hero shock her into reconsidering her own values.

Anna Parker's family—her parents, twin brother, and younger sister—move under a cloud from a New Jersey suburb to a Maine seaside resort. Her twin brother Bill has stolen money from his Columbia High School football team and the consequent embarrassment makes it difficult for the family, especially her father who teaches in the school his son attends, to face the community. The parents have arranged to run a clambake restaurant in which they employ their own children as well as young people from the community. Anna is especially angry because she must miss her senior year and separate from her boyfriend Tony Nardone.

However, the Maine setting quickly develops its own crisis when Kirk Cunningham, a college student whom the Parkers employ, is murdered, ironically while playing a murder game with fellow restaurant workers. Suspicion falls initially on Bill, Anna's brother, and Tony, her boyfriend from New Jersey who appears unannounced at Anna's home the night of the murder.

Fearful that her brother is wrongfully accused and convinced that Tony is innocent, Anna sets out to identify the murderer. This leads to a series of interviews with the various teen-agers who played the game—Charlotte, Kirk's supposed girlfriend; Nicki, Kirk's sister; Larry, Kirk's brother; Watson, Charlotte's former boyfriend; and Dick, Kirk's best friend. Gradually Anna pieces together the relationships among these young people and discovers that all was not as she imagined—that Kirk, who had appeared to her to be an ideal young man, a movie star, had an evil, exploitive side that provided adequate motivation for any number of people to want him dead.

As she discovers clues and comes close to identifying Kirk's murderer, the murderer realizes she is reaching a solution and stalks Anna and threatens to kill her.



About the Author

Born in 1936 in Morristown, New Jersey, Sandra Scoppettone grew up in the New Jersey suburb of South Orange and attended Columbia High School, Maplewood. This experience directly and indirectly informs much of her writing for young adults. In addition, she has lived subsequently on Long Island and in New York City.

After graduating from Columbia in 1954, Scoppettone began a career as a writer in New York. Initially she saw herself as a novelist and wrote a number of novels that were not published.

Then in the 1960s she turned to drama and had play and television scripts performed off Broadway and on the television networks. Her career as a novelist resumed in the early 1970s when she used an experience directing teen-agers in summer theater for her first young adult novel. From the late 1980s she has concentrated on the adult detective novel, publishing under her own name and the pen name "Jack Early."

Unlike *Playing Murder*, which is a straightforward mystery novel involving heterosexual romance and sleuthing, much of her previous writing for young adults has aroused controversy because of its subject matter. Her first young adult novel *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974) is based on her directing experience. It relates the effects of a homosexual relationship upon a group of teen-agers working on a summer musical production. *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978) recounts a lesbian relationship between teen-agers and the crisis its discovery causes in their lives and those of their families. *The Late Great Me* (1976) focuses on a teen-age girl's experience with alcoholism, and its traumatic effect on her, her friends, and her family.

Many critics have praised Scoppettone's candor while others have protested the graphic descriptions and occasional violence. Scoppettone herself makes no apologies because she herself is a "recovered alcoholic" and "a lesbian who has lived with the writer Linda Crawford for twenty years."

Thus, she writes "about important issues in my own life or in the lives of people I've known."

Setting

The setting for *Playing Murder* is a picturesque summer resort on the coast of Maine. The local residents work as fishermen and restaurant workers to feed and entertain the tourists. cursory descriptions are provided of the seashore, the woods, the older homes, and several restaurants, but these are secondary to the development of relationships among the Parker family and the teen-agers employed in the clambake restaurant.

Social Sensitivity

The characters in *Playing Murder* are all Caucasians living in a Yankee community. Racial minorities are totally absent. What social distinctions there are concern economic class. The Parkers feel the loss of social status that their son's thievery has caused in New Jersey, so they flee home and jobs to gain a fresh start. This humiliation causes Anna to resent her brother, and her parents to withdraw into silence.

Their buying a restaurant suggests that they will now have to work with their hands more than with their minds, even though Mr. Parker is a teacher and Mrs. Parker a writer of mystery novels. However, by the end of the novel the family is communicating more fully and candidly because of the crisis they have faced and overcome.

The people they encounter in Maine are primarily middle class, although one character, Watson, has started a blue-collar career as a lobsterman.

However, he would prefer to attend college. Tony Nardone does not plan to attend college but to enter military service. Kirk and Dick are college students. As Anne solves the mystery she gradually realizes that education is no guarantee of moral character.

Literary Qualities

Told from Anna's point of view, *Playing Murder* makes considerable use of flashback and dialogue. Because Anna and her family are newcomers to the community, there is much background that they do not know. This means that each Maine character speaks frequently about Kirk, his family, and his or her relationship to him.

Despite this approach, the narrative moves along briskly. Dialogue within the Parker family reveals a growing realization that they need to communicate more fully and openly.

Scopettone uses Maine dialect, but not to the extent that characters speak in indecipherable phonetic English. The vocabulary is simple and the sentence structure direct.



Themes and Characters

Central to the novel is the theme that appearances often mask very different realities. As a first-person narrator, Anna is constantly misinterpreting situations, primarily because she is obsessed with her own concerns, not those of others. Thus, she is initially upset with her brother because the move to Maine interrupts her senior year and a romantic relationship. That her brother is experiencing all sorts of problems arising from his short stature is insignificant. In Maine she becomes infatuated with Kirk Cunningham despite warning signals that he may be exploiting her. She also abandons her old boyfriend Tony Nardone who nonetheless remains concerned for her well being when he realizes she may be in trouble.

After the murder Anna begins to observe people more carefully and slowly realizes that her own certainties about parents, siblings, and peers are often inaccurate. Eventually her sleuthing leads to her identifying the murderer, but at a great threat to her own safety. By the end of the novel she has come to value her brother, Tony, and her parents because she knows that their concern for her is sincere. She also admits she has misjudged the local teen-agers. In this realization she offers a role model for young adult readers who may be quick to judge people and situations on superficial evidence. She recognizes her mistakes.

Other characters, with the possible exception of her twin brother Bill, do not emerge fully in Anna's narrative.

They are a cross section of fairly stereotypical parents, a bumbling detective, and a miscellany of teen-agers. All the teen-agers have dark sides to them, but since the main focus of the novel is identification of the murderer, none emerges fully drawn. Once they provide the evidence they have, Anna rushes on to the next encounter and a resolution. Even at the end of the novel we do not know why Kirk Cunningham, who resembles a movie idol physically, became the evil person he was.

The lack of development of these characters is a major weakness of this novel.

Adaptations

The Late Great Me was presented on television as an ABC Afterschool special in 1979. An analysis of this special would offer an opportunity to discuss the ability of print and electronic media to deal with troublesome subjects like alcoholism and sexuality. (16mm.

Distributor, Daniel Wilson, 300 West 55th Street, New York, NY 10019.)



Topics for Discussion

1. Does Anna's response to her brother Bill's problems seem plausible?
2. What do you think of Anna's reaction to meeting Kirk Cunningham?
Does her abandonment of Tony Nardone for Kirk seem well motivated?
3. What aspects of Anna's personality seem to make the local people guarded in their encounters with her?
4. In what ways does Scoppettone's portrayal of the detective Harvard Smolley draw upon television and film stereotypes?
5. Does the failure of Kirk's parents and other adults to ascertain his evil nature seem believable? Do you think he escaped detection too long?
6. In what ways does Scoppettone continue the tradition of Nancy Drew and other female teen-age detectives?
7. How does Scoppettone drop clues throughout the story as well as false leads to alert the reader to matters Anna may not grasp?
8. In what ways is this an antiromantic novel? How does Anna's final decision not to have a boyfriend for the time being indicate her growing maturity?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Scoppettone's *The Late Great Me*, a young adult novel concerned with alcoholism. How does Geri, the teen-age narrator of the novel, resemble Anna? How does Geri's boyfriend David Townsend resemble Kirk Cunningham? Tony Nardone? Compare and contrast Geri's relationship with her family with Anna's. Which novel is the more complex in the development of character?
2. Heterosexual attraction is a central concern of *Playing Murder*. Two of Scoppettone's other novels, *Trying Hard to Hear You* and *Happy Endings Are All Alike* deal with homosexual and lesbian relationships among teen-agers. Read one or both novels and discuss the characters' attitudes toward their own and others' sexuality.
3. Anna tells readers that her mother writes mysteries and compares her own efforts to that of her mother's fictional detective Libby Crawford. Read a murder mystery by another author and compare the structure employed by Scoppettone with that of the other author. Do there appear to be similarities in the ways in which mystery writers present and solve their mysteries?
4. Using Book Review Index, find reviews of *Playing Murder* and determine what the critical consensus was among reviewers. Do you agree or disagree with their judgments?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Sandra Scoppettone." In *Something About the Author*.

Vol. 9. Detroit: Gale Research, 1975: 162. This entry offers valuable information about Scoppettone's career as a writer of plays, television scripts, and novels through 1975.

"Sandra Scoppettone." In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Detroit: Vol. 26.

Gale Research, 1982: 400-405. This entry includes extracts from reviews of Scoppettone's novels published through 1982.

"Sandra Scoppettone." In *Speaking for Ourselves*. Donald R. Gallo, ed. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990: 186-187.

This entry offers Scoppettone's own assessment of her work.

"Sandra Scoppettone." In *TwentiethCentury Young Adult Writers*. Chicago: St. James, 1994. This entry provides a complete bibliography of all her work.



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